

# Southern California - 2005

[UPDATE: March, 2011—As I gradually go back over my old travelogues, I'll be leaving the original text intact but adding additional comments in boldfaced enclosed in brackets to expand on what was originally said. I'll also add some additional scanned photos to enhance the original travelogues.]

Our schedule at school this year included a four-day weekend in March, the result of conferences and a "comp time" for curriculum work. **[It's been years since we had that type of schedule; now they seem to find it imperative that we finish before Memorial Day at all costs.]** That provided the chance for a nice spring getaway, which turned out to be a most enjoyable trip. I crammed a surprising amount of things into a short vacation, but I enjoyed almost all of it.



**Thursday,  
March 10**

**Palm trees on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood  
(Blessed Sacrament Church in background)**

I taught Statistics at the college this spring every Tuesday and Thursday night. Tonight all I had scheduled was a test. Tuesday the same test had taken some students about two and a half hours, but tonight everyone finished in just over an hour. That let me get out of town and on the road relatively early. **[This particular semester the Tuesday section was made up largely of high school kids who were taking the course for essentially "free" college credit, while the Tuesday section was mostly non-traditional students. The older students who are going back to school tend both to struggle and to be perfectionists—both of which make them take longer on tests. Shortly after this we would begin offering Statistics for college credit during the school day at Garrigan. That lightened my load at the college and made me teach mostly older students at night.]**

It was very windy out tonight, a strong northerly wind. It took both hands to keep the car on the road as I headed down highway 18 toward Clear Lake. I stopped briefly at the Hardees in Garner for a ham and cheese sandwich—the only real food I ate all day—and then kept on driving eastward. I briefly entered I-35 and then immediately exited again. I used to do that quite frequently, as the county road here is a quick route into Mason City. There's less and less in Mason City proper, though, so there's less reason to take that road. It was, however, my destination tonight. I was headed to the Clear Lake Super 8, which is right beside the exit next to an expensive gas station and a bar that used to be a Happy Chef.

I checked in quickly and made my way to a small, basic room with the sparsest of furnishings. This was standard at Super 8 back in the '70s when this place was built. The chain has upscaled a bit since then, and this is now definitely one of their low-end properties. The price was right, though (less than \$40 a night), and it was certainly adequate for the brief time I would be here. **[These days the same hotel typically charges closer to \$75 a night. They don't seem to have renovated in any meaningful way, and it's most decidedly NOT worth that much.]**

I noticed it was snowing as I hauled my bag in from the car, and the wind was still extremely brisk. I hoped the weather would cooperate for an early flight tomorrow morning. The combination of the weather, the anticipation of an early departure, and an unfamiliar bed kept me from sleeping very well. I got a few winks here and there, but not really a good night's sleep.

## Friday, March 11

I was wide-awake at 4am and watched a bit of CNN as I washed and organized. The big story was about airport security problems—not exactly what I wanted to hear on a day I was flying. I took a relatively long shower, enjoying the fact that this older motel had old-fashioned, rather than low-flow showerheads.

At 4:30 the phone rang with what was presumably a wake-up call I had arranged with the desk. I say “presumably” because all the call consisted of was loud instrumental music. While I had already been up for a while, the wake-up call was my cue to get packed up and head off for the airport. I left my key at the desk and headed out to my car.

A bit of snow had accumulated overnight, but the wind had died down considerably. I let the car idle a bit to clear a thick coating of frost from the windshield **[something I was willing to do when gas was cheaper, but likely wouldn't now that it's pushing \$3.40 a gallon]** and then made the two-mile drive to MCW airport. I got there shortly after 4:45, about an hour before my flight was scheduled to depart. The place had obviously been open for a while, and three other passengers had already checked in. I had officially checked in online, but I double-checked at the desk to make sure things were in order. Then I bought some coffee from a vending machine to get my morning caffeine fix. **[I always get to MCW well before departure time—which is what the airlines and airport say you should do. It really isn't necessary in the age of online check-in, though, as security doesn't even open until shortly before departure.]**

I settled into one of the many chrome and black leatherette chairs that fill the lobby at MCW, sipped coffee, and read the morning's *Globe-Gazette*. When I looked up a few minutes later I happened to notice some familiar faces. Gene Meister, my superintendent, was standing in line at the check-in desk together with his wife MaryAnn, their son Mark, and Mark's girlfriend. The four of them would be spending a week in Florida, watching Major League Baseball spring training. **[As I write this revision the Meister family is on a similar trip to spring training in Arizona.]** Like me, they were flying on Northwest and transferring in Minneapolis **[I can't imagine anyone just flying from Mason City to MSP and ending their itinerary in the Twin Cities; it would be quite a bit easier to drive.]**, so they were on the same flight out of Mason City. Meisters are very nice people, and we had a pleasant visit as we waited for security to open.

While the security employees at MCW appear to be full time employees, they only actually work for about half an hour prior to each of the three flights that leave Mason City each day. (There are actually technically six flights, but for the other three, the destination is Fort Dodge, a place no one in their right mind would fly to from Mason City.) The small work load allows them the time to be very efficient, though. Security is probably tighter here than at most major airports. Both my carry-on and I got through without incident, but Gene Meister was detained for quite a while because MaryAnn had a pair of sewing scissors in the carry-on she and Gene shared. Gene would not fit anyone's profile of a terrorist, but he got everything short of a strip search before they eventually took out the scissors and allowed him to board. **[Strangely, those sewing scissors would be allowed these days, though pop bottles and coffee cups—which were commonplace on airplanes at the time—are now forbidden.]**

We had an uneventful flight up to Minneapolis. The most noteworthy aspect was that it was pitch dark the whole way **[since it was before 6am in March]**. Rod, the flight attendant, made it clear that there was not really supposed to be any service on this flight, but said he would serve beverages if people wanted them—with his tone of voice letting us know this was a **big** imposition on him. Others wanted beverages, so I took advantage of them too. The in-flight coffee was quite a bit better than my cup from the vending machine.

Seated across the aisle from me was a young black man who lived in Tampa but worked a construction job in Ft. Dodge. He apparently flew this route fairly frequently and remarked that he couldn't understand why—when Mason City and Ft. Dodge were approximately the same size—only a handful of people ever board in Ft. Dodge, but the plane is always full between Mason City and Minneapolis. On this particular flight, part of the reason for that would be that the plane leaves Ft. Dodge at 5am, which would require you to be at the airport at a truly ungodly hour. It leaves Mason City at 5:45, which still requires being at the airport early—but not quite so ridiculous as Ft. Dodge. The man's observations are true on midday and evening flights as well, though. There's always a crowd flying to and from MCW, but hardly anyone on the leg going to FOD. Mason City is in a more populated area, probably drawing

Algona is almost exactly halfway between the two “cities” and the prices for flying from both places are identical (and often less than flying out of Minneapolis). I must say, though, that it's never seriously occurred to me to fly out of Ft. Dodge. That's probably because the Mason City airport is easy to get to (just off highway 18 and just east of I-35), while FOD is on an out of the way two-lane street. Mostly, though, it's because Mason City is just a nicer town than Ft. Dodge—which always comes across as dumpy and depressed. It would be like offering someone in Mt. Pleasant the choice of going to Iowa City (though Mason City is nowhere near as big as Iowa City) or Ottumwa. There's not much question which one they would choose.

**[In addition to the reasons already mentioned, Fort Dodge Regional Airport is in an inconvenient location on a minor street in a residential neighborhood. Mason City Municipal Airport, on the other hand, is on a four-lane highway just off I-35, which makes it MUCH easier to get to. Since Northwest was absorbed by Delta, they've split up the MCW and FOD routes. Now three flights a day serve MCW in each direction, while just two serve FOD. At present all those flights are in danger of being eliminated as Congress debates the 2012 budget. Mason City and Ft. Dodge are among hundreds of small cities around the country whose air service is subsidized under the Essential Air Service Program. The program dates back to the Carter era (when airlines were first deregulated and allowed to set their own schedules), and the pittance Delta receives (about a million dollars a year for MCW service) would be the tiniest speck in the federal deficit. Today's Congress apparently sees the program as “pork”, though, so in the future I'll likely have to drive to either Minneapolis or Des Moines if I want to fly.]**

We arrived in Minneapolis slightly early, just before 6:30am. Meisters had a relatively tight transfer, and I walked with them to their gate (nearly a half-hour walk **[a fairly typical transfer at MSP]**). After saying goodbye, I had pretty much the whole morning to kill, since my flight didn't leave until around noon. MSP may be more interesting than many airports, but it's still far from an exciting place to spend a large amount of time. I had planned in advance to take the Twin Cities' new light rail line into town and kill some time having breakfast. I was traveling with only carry-on luggage, and in this age of heightened security they no longer have baggage lockers on the concourses, so I'd have to take my bag (basically a backpack on wheels) with me. **[They've since re-opened the lockers at MSP. I must say that at the time it struck me as silly that bags that had already passed through security would not allowed in temporary storage.]**

I knew from past trips that there was a light rail station under the airport that had an exit that somehow connected with the skyway security checkpoint by the parking ramps. I didn't know exactly where the station was, though, and there were absolutely no signs for it anywhere in the terminal. (Apparently they have signed it with "ground transportation" from baggage claim, but there's nothing on the concourses about it.) I found the skyway checkpoint (which is pretty hard to miss), but I didn't see anything that looked like a station entrance anywhere near there either. Eventually I asked the guard who was keeping people from going in the exit instead of going through the metal detectors if he could tell me where the rail station was. He was very pleasant and acted as if that question was the first break he had from total boredom all day. He directed me to a nearby elevator and basically told me to go to some specific level of the parking ramp (2, I think), from which the station entrance was obvious. I still don't follow why there were no signs, but the transfer was indeed quite smooth. **[They've since added signs for the light rail station in the skywalk between the G and C concourses. This may be because Mall of America has started marketing themselves as a destination for people on layovers at MSP.]**

The level where I got off the elevator is where they store rental cars at MSP. I passed the customer desks for several car companies and could see the service area where they wash and refuel the returned cars. Just beyond there was a sky-lit escalator well that led down to the lobby of the subway station. Lining the marble walls were enormous banners that welcomed me (and presumably every visitor) to the Twin Cities.

Like most new transit systems, the Twin Cities' train uses honor system ticketing. Before you head down to the platforms, you're supposed to buy a ticket from an extremely complicated vending machine. I had brought a ton of change for such machines, mostly in the form of dimes and nickels. Unfortunately the machine was set so you only had a short time to insert your coins. If you went over the limit, the machine re-set and returned the coins you had entered. I was able to get in about a dollar's worth of coins, but I had to use paper money for the balance of the \$3 fare. (I could have bought a one-way ticket for \$1.75, but I chose instead to buy a six-hour pass for unlimited train and bus travel.) **[Actually Twin Cities transit tickets are not "one way" fares, but rather are passes valid for 2½ hours. My excursion was likely to be slightly, but not much, longer than that.]**

While I was buying my ticket, a couple from Arkansas was buying tickets at the next machine. They asked if I was from the Cities and wondered if I knew which station to get off at for the state capitol. They apparently had visited state capitols all over America and were eager to "collect" Minnesota. I'd taken the Hiawatha light rail a couple of times before and knew that it connects Bloomington (Mall of America) with downtown Minneapolis, but it goes nowhere near the capitol. I told them that, but I also checked out the system map they had posted nearby and suggested they could transfer at the Metrodome to a bus that ran the length of University Avenue into St. Paul. **[They've just begun construction on a second light rail line that will connect the two downtowns, and several further extensions of the system are planned.]**



**Mississippi River—from the 46<sup>th</sup> Street/Ford Parkway Bridge – Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota**

My ultimate destination was also in St. Paul, though nowhere near the capitol. I took a standing room only train north four stations to 46<sup>th</sup> Street and walked eastward for about a mile. The walk took me through a quiet residential neighborhood that I had wandered through in summer. It was quite a bit different with snow on the ground and a brisk wind blowing. I dragged my bag behind

me, and at one point the wheels got caught on a pile of salt or perhaps half-melted ice. In general, though, the sidewalk was clear. It was definitely on the chilly side (right at 32°), but mostly I had a pleasant walk.

After about a mile, 46<sup>th</sup> Street curves south slightly to cross the Mississippi. There are beautiful views of the river from the bridge. On the other side of the river the street enters St. Paul and becomes Ford Parkway, an old shopping strip that is rapidly gentrifying. The street is named after an enormous factory where they now make Nissan trucks, although the plant still has a big “Ford” sign in front. I walked just a couple of blocks into St. Paul, stopping directly across from the factory at a Baker’s Square restaurant.

I mostly think of Baker’s Square as a place to have dinner. They feature their desserts (award winning pies in particular), and I’d never really thought about having breakfast there. As it turns out, it’s a wonderful place for breakfast. I was seated immediately, without even a comment about my bag. I ordered “ham and eggs”, which turned out to be an immense slice of real bone-in ham (the serving we charged \$5.99 for when I worked at the Iris almost thirty years ago) together with two perfectly cooked eggs, and a small portion of hash browns. The plate was garnished with the sections of half an orange. I had a choice of getting pancakes, toast, a muffin, or a cinnamon roll to accompany the meal. I chose the cinnamon roll, which was outstanding—basically a smaller version of those gooey things they sell for \$3.95 at Cinnabon. I also had coffee and grapefruit juice, which all combined to be a truly enormous breakfast. I sure couldn’t complain about the price, though. The whole thing—including tax and tip—set me back less than \$10 (... and at \$2 each, it was the coffee and juice that jacked the price that high). I like old-style “family restaurants” like this, places where you can get basic, hearty food at reasonable prices. It seems like more and more of them are closing down, which really is too bad. Breakfast has always been just about my favorite meal to eat out, and for me a place like this made a perfect meal.

I picked up a copy of the *Pioneer Press* from a box outside the restaurant. The big story was about various proposals the transit board had for raising fares. (No matter which they pick, the base fare will soon be \$2.) Adding the light rail line to what used to be just a bus system has increased overall ridership in the area by almost 50%, but that means they are actually losing more money on operations. (Apparently they lose about 75¢ for every bus passenger they carry and 40¢ for every rail passenger.) It used to be that federal money filled the gap between fares and costs, but that money has dried up in recent years.

Surprisingly, though, while the government isn’t providing money for day-to-day operations, under President Bush the transportation department has been quite generous in doling out big bucks for capital improvements. The Hiawatha rail line cost nearly a billion dollars, and over three-fourths of it was paid for with federal money. (Supporters point out that the astronomical cost is about half as much as a freeway that would carry the same volume of commuters costs.) Minnesota found it hard to refuse that influx of federal funds, and the rail line is certainly a step forward for the city. Unfortunately, they are left with the cost of keeping it going. I’ve since found that almost every other transit system in the country is faced with the same problem—money to burn for equipment and expansion, but nothing for ordinary operations.

**[It’s actually not all that surprising that Bush advanced big transit construction projects. Those projects provide big bucks for the major corporations (many based in Texas) that funded his administration. The working class people who ride the trains and buses, though, were left with paying for the big projects. I blame Bush (who was in office at the time), but these days it seems that just about every politician in both parties cares more about corporate profits than about helping society as a whole.]**

There was a bus stop right outside the restaurant, and I decided to save myself the walk back to the rail station by taking the bus back down 46<sup>th</sup> Street. The schedules at the bus stop reminded me of why I like rail lines but hate buses. Five different buses stopped at this particular stop, two of which happened to go to 46<sup>th</sup> Street station. (A third went to a different rail station.) I deduced from the schedules that the next bus that would work for me would be bus #74. This bus ran every half hour, but was due in about ten minutes. About five minutes later a bus arrived with “74-A” and some destination I’d never heard of showing on the front. I honestly didn’t know if it was the bus I wanted or not. Fortunately the driver (an almost overly pleasant elderly woman) assured me that it was headed to the station. Apparently “74” runs a main line down Ford Parkway and 46<sup>th</sup> Street and then splits into no less than eight different branches. The branches serve various residential areas in southern Minneapolis at two-hour intervals—hardly a convenient service. It was hardly a surprise that, while the train had been full, this bus was nearly empty.

I still had tons of time to kill, so I pulled the cord on the bus a few blocks before we got to the train station. Right by the stop was a pretentious coffee bar called Minnehaha Coffee. I ordered a demitasse of coffee and an apple cider. I expected to be served apple juice in a glass cup, perhaps with ice. Instead I got a coffee cup full of a steaming, frothy cider that had been run through the espresso machine. It wasn’t what I expected, but it really was quite good.

I walked back to the rail station, missing a southbound train by seconds. Fortunately rail service is much more frequent than bus service in Minneapolis. Even late at night and on weekends trains are never more than 15 minutes apart, and most of the day 7½ minutes is the norm. They also have the same heat lamps on the street level platforms here that they use on the Chicago ‘L’, (I think they were actually first developed for bus stops in Minneapolis), so I could wait in relative comfort.

It was well past rush hour now, and I was pleased to have a seat for the return trip to the airport. The trip was quick and uneventful. In retrospect, the only thing that stands out about it was that absolutely everyone in the car was white—unusual these days even in Minnesota, and very different from most of what I’d be seeing in the next few days.

Instead of the elevator I took a seemingly endless string of escalators from the airport station up to the concourse level. On one of these my bag almost didn’t make it onto the step behind me. There was a short line at the skyway security checkpoint, and they seemed to be processing everyone through with the most cursory of inspections—quite the opposite of Mason City. I had planned for possible delays, so I still had tons of time left before my flight.

I quickly found gate G-16, from which my plane was scheduled to leave. When I arrived they were boarding a flight for Las Vegas. Above the waiting area a big TV was blaring CNN. The big story was of a convict who had shot his way past security at a courthouse in Atlanta. At this point he was still at large, and CNN (which is, of course, based in Atlanta) was eager to be part of the chase. **[This has to be one of the last times that a cable news station actually reported NEWS. Everything on all the news stations these days seems to be political, with talking heads giving one biased opinion or another.]**

With over an hour before they'd even start boarding my flight, I decided to wander around the airport. I crossed the skywalk back to the "C" concourse, where they have a new tram system to transport people faster than the moving sidewalks. I took the tram to its far end (by the connection to the "A" and "B" concourses) and then back to the station nearest the main terminal. It amazed me that they were able to build the thing, since the concourses and parking ramps at MSP are packed very tightly together. At times both sides of the tram were literally inches from building walls.

My great experience allowed me to give directions to a rather confused college boy who was waiting at one of the tram stops. I'm always amazed at the number of people who ask me for directions when I travel. Fortunately, I'm able to give a competent answer to most of their requests. It helps to have done a lot of advance planning for most of my travels—though here in the airport my "knowledge" came from having just come from the place the kid wanted to go.

Riding the trams took about 15 minutes, so I still had plenty of time. I explored "Northstar Crossing", which is essentially a big shopping mall that connects the two largest concourses. There are stores and restaurants interspersed among all the gates at MSP, but here there it's just shopping—no gates at all. The main terminal with ticketing and baggage claim is on one side of Northstar Crossing, while the other side abuts the back of a parking ramp. I strolled through without buying a thing, and then just headed down the "F" and "G" concourses, making my way back to the gate.

The waiting area was full when I got back, though most of the passengers appeared to actually be waiting for a flight to Chicago Midway at gate G-15. Once they started boarding that flight, I was able to find a place to sit. Boarding our flight seemed to take forever, dragged out all the more by the fact that I was clear at the front of the coach section (they always board from the rear **[at least the did on Northwest—Delta seems to have little pattern whatsoever as to which boarding zone is which]**). Even so, we left the gate exactly on time.

I was in an aisle seat. A fifty-ish legal secretary from Minneapolis occupied the center seat. She was raveling with her son, who was apparently also in a center seat—but quite a bit further back in the plane. She was redeeming frequent flyer miles for a trip to Hawaii. This flight would take her to Los Angeles, and after a four hour layover a longer flight would take her on to Honolulu. **[Margaret and I would make a similar transfer in Seattle when we went to Seattle a few years later.]** The woman was pleasant and talkative, the sort of person who really seems to enjoy travel.

In the window seat (though he offered to trade with me) was a young black man who worked in some executive capacity for Northwest Airlines. The man lives in Pasadena, but works at Northwest's headquarters near MSP. He keeps an apartment in downtown Minneapolis, but he has never spent a weekend in Minnesota. The man seemed surprised that I was actually going to Los Angeles for a pleasure trip. He apparently deals a lot with people who hate L.A. and seem to find nothing better to do than complain about the place. They whine about crowding, traffic, and pollution, and they complain about people who don't speak English. In many cases they never make it to the city at all—instead exploring the "charming" industrial suburbs between the airport and Disneyland.

Seeing that I was not one of these people made my seatmate quickly take a shine to me. He was a lifelong Angelino, and he was truly amazed that a Midwesterner would know anything at all of the different neighborhoods in the city. He agreed with me that L.A.'s ethnic diversity—not its weather—is the city's greatest asset.

The man called our flight attendant by name—Lily—and this elegant Asian woman obviously knew him personally. While she served soft drinks and coffee to everyone else in coach, she gave my seatmate a free glass of red wine. The man had brought his own sandwich on board with him, and Lily also managed to find some mustard he could use on it.

I was in seat 15-C, which was the aisle seat in the second row of coach. With the new security regulations, they no longer curtain off the first class section, and I entertained myself through much of the flight watching the rich people. While meals are no longer included in the coach fare, first class still gets to eat. There appeared to be a choice of chicken or lasagna on this flight, with cheesecake served separately about an hour after the rest of the meal. The first class passengers also got served on real dishes (although the new security regulations require them to use plastic knives and forks). While my seatmate's wine came in a plastic water glass, the first class passengers had those plastic wine glasses they use at intermission at theatres. The food was served on round china plates, with those silver plate covers they use in fancy restaurants. First class also enjoyed pillows (which they no longer distribute in coach)—and, of course, they get to recline in much more comfortable seats.

Instead of a meal, coach passengers were offered the option of buying a "snack box" for \$3 (cash only, exact change requested **[they've since eliminated cash and gone to credit cards only]**). I chose to buy one, though I doubt I'll be buying another. **[I've actually bought several; they're entertaining if nothing else.]** The actual retail value of the goods is probably more than \$3, but there wasn't much of anything I really wanted. There was an individually wrapped Oreo cookie, a granola bar, a pack of 3 round crackers and a wedge of cheese spread like the stuff they sell in Christmas gift packs. The box also included a small bag of dried fruit, a bag of cheese-flavored Goldfish crackers, and a small stick of summer sausage. I eventually ate everything except the sausage (a food I absolutely detest), but I can't really say I enjoyed any of it. **[Both Northwest and Delta have since come up with better versions of the snack boxes, and these days there's usually a choice of multiple versions available on most flights.]**

I filled most of the time on the flight reading a book called *The Next L.A.* that I had found while browsing on Amazon.com. It was essentially a college textbook for a course in California political history. Dull as that may sound, it was really a fascinating book. It also made a three-hour flight go fairly quickly.



**“The Encounter” at LAX**

gate. Terminal 2 (which is used by Northwest, Continental, KLM, and some Mexican airline I'd never heard of) is quite small (just eleven gates), so before I knew it I was outside in the “ground transport” area—more than an hour earlier than I had planned. **[Each individual terminal at LAX is compact, but it would be a nightmare to transfer from one terminal to another—which can sometimes be required even for continuing flights on the same airline.]**

**[The picture above has been included since the original version of this travelogue, and it shows THE visual focus at LAX. The picture was taken from the top of the escalator looking just past the exit to the concourse in the Northwest terminal. A lot of L.A.'s famous architecture dates to the '60s, and The Encounter is no exception. This revolving restaurant is in the middle of a sea of parking ramps at the entrance to LAX. While the “space age” design is more than a little dated these days, it's held up well and really doesn't look out of place at an airport. If I should ever have an extended layover at LAX (like if I ever fulfill my fantasy of going to New Zealand), it might be fun to eat there.]**

I was totally dependent on public transportation on this trip, and I had read that getting from LAX into the city could be a nightmare. It is complicated, but everything worked seamlessly for me. One bus, three trains, and about an hour later, I was steps away from my motel. **[I've said before and I will reiterate here—Los Angeles is NOT a difficult place to use public transportation. Given its reputation, it's amazing just how good the transit is there.]**

I first went to a bus bay in the middle of the circular drive that surrounds the terminals. I knew in advance that I wanted shuttle bus “G”. Within five minutes that bus showed up, and it carried me and a couple of airport employees who were getting off work to the green line Aviation station just outside the airport. The trip was probably less than a mile, but it would have been absolutely unwalkable.

L.A.'s transit system has simpler vending machines than Minneapolis, but they also timed out before I could insert sufficient dimes or nickels. **[Why they'd include a time feature in such machines, I have no idea. It seems silly to me.]** Unfortunately their bill acceptors would only accept the crispest of bills fresh from the bank. I ended up paying \$3 in quarters for an unlimited day pass on the L.A. MTA. (The base fare here, by the way, is \$1.25.) I used some of my dimes and nickels to buy a bunch of local papers from news boxes at the station **[interesting, since news machines often accept only quarters].**

Aviation station was familiar. Margaret and I spent a **long** time here waiting for a bus to Redondo Beach a few years back. The place is decorated with oversized concrete chairs and couches that look like they belong in the Flintstones' living room. It's definitely the most architecturally interesting thing in a neighborhood of cement block buildings housing auto parts stores and adult video arcades. At that, the station is hardly the glamour point of L.A.'s rail system. Newspapers blew around the busway and the rail platform was covered with some unidentified sticky substance. The escalator that was broken when Margaret and I were here before was also not in service today.

I had just missed a train when the shuttle bus pulled into the busway. However, by the time I had bought my ticket there was just a short wait before the next train arrived. The green line runs an entirely elevated route, mostly in the median of I-105 (which is also mostly elevated). The stations are about a mile apart, and the trains rush from one to the next at roughly the same speed as freeway traffic. The route runs through areas that are supposedly some of the most dangerous, gang-infested places in the country. From the train, though, they look suburban—old, densely packed suburbs, but suburbs nonetheless. I could as easily have been in Moline or Joliet as in Inglewood or Hawthorne. **[In my Statistics class I use an example that centers around a gang murder in Hawthorne, and it really is hard to imagine that kind of crime amid all the palm trees and stucco bungalows.]**

I could tell from my fellow passengers that this wasn't Moline, though. On this train, as on almost every other train or bus I'd ride in metro Los Angeles, I was the only Anglo passenger. On the green line most of the other riders were black, while on the other

lines the vast majority were Hispanic. Every once in a while I'd see Asian people riding transit in L.A., but only on the rarest of occasions was there another white rider. No one ever seemed to care one way or the other about my race, but I must say it was odd to so consistently be part of a tiny minority. **[This description is a SLIGHT exaggeration, but I was definitely in the minority on transit in L.A.]**

I took the green line to Rosa Parks station, which is located next to a shopping center in the heart of South Central L.A. I walked downstairs and across the park-and-ride lot to the blue line platform. In just a couple of minutes a very crowded blue line train arrived. I rested myself and my bag near a support post in the middle of the car, where I stood for about half of the trip. My location gave me a good view of something I had not noticed before from the blue line, the Watts basketball courts that were featured in the movie *White Men Can't Jump*. These courts are located right next to the train tracks (they show the blue line trains in the movie) near the Watts Towers. Surprising to me was that they were on the property of a United Methodist church. I don't often think of **United Methodists** in inner city neighborhoods; more often I expect to see the AME or any of a wide assortment of Baptists. This church bore the cross and flame, though, and the basketball courts were definitely part of the church complex. **[While it is indeed a United Methodist church, I dare say this church probably bears as much resemblance to most UMCs as Trinity United Church of Christ (the controversial church where President Obama was once a member) has to my local Congregational church.]**

Eventually we reached a major station where a lot of the seated passengers exited. I quickly darted for a seat and placed my bag between my legs. An elderly Hispanic man sat down next to me. He spent the remainder of the trip reading the book of Revelation from a Spanish New Testament. Periodically people would pass through the car trying to sell things they might or might not have come across legally. I had heard the blue line described as a moving flea market, and this seemed to confirm that description. **[It is, of course, experiences like this that are why suburban whites shun transit in L.A. I found this a fascinating bit of local color, but many would find it overwhelming.]**

No one will ever describe the area through which the blue line passes as beautiful. While the homes are mostly single-family bungalows, it's fairly clear this is a slum rather than a suburb. It occurred to me that the blue line really should be named the yellow line. South Central Los Angeles is almost entirely built of stucco, almost all of which has aged to a sickly yellow color. Combined with the yellow-green branches of the sickly palm trees that pretend to decorate the place and the endless warning signs that attempt to keep people off the tracks of the deadliest rail line in the world, the color yellow really dominates the place.

After about half an hour the train arrived at the 7<sup>th</sup> St./Metro Center subway station in downtown Los Angeles. I walked down to the lower platform and almost immediately boarded a red line train. I went west three stations to Vermont/Beverly, one of the nicest stations in the entire system. The platform level is entirely marble and features pillars that imitate traditional Greek columns. A series of three long escalators leads up to street level, where an enormous boulder shelters the entrance and the plaza is filled with desert plants.



**Comfort Inn—Vermont Avenue – Los Angeles, California  
(The plaza housing the Metro entrance is at the left side of the photo.)**

I had walked by the motel where I would be staying when I was here before. I knew it was not in the best of neighborhoods, but it was convenient to the metro. The second statement was certainly true; indeed it would be hard for it to be more convenient. From the metro entrance I walked past a rather seedy bar. The next building north **[another yellow stucco building]** was the Comfort Inn. **[I don't think I've ever stayed in a hotel that was more convenient to transportation. It's nice to have the subway literally steps from your door.]** In addition to being convenient, this was also quite reasonably priced. I've paid more for less in Iowa **[which for no reason I can figure out is one of the more expensive hotel markets in the country].**

This was a weird motel. To enter the elegantly decorated lobby, I had to walk through the street-level parking ramp. **[There's a very abrupt entrance to that ramp off Vermont Street by the palm tree just to the left of the hotel in the picture. The alley to the north leads to a different parking ramp that serves an apartment building and a technical college.]** From the lobby an elevator led up to three floors of rooms. I entered one side of the elevator and exited the other side. In back, the hotel had open-air hallways like the sort you'd find in an old Motel 6. However, instead of facing a parking lot, these just looked out at just a tiny airshaft between the motel and the neighboring buildings. The rooms were fairly large, but the furnishings had long ago seen their better days. It reminded me in many ways of the sort of European hotels where high school tour groups stay **[and apparently they get lots of high school groups—band tours and the like]**. There was nothing wrong with it (and I knew exactly what I was getting into ahead of time), but it certainly wasn't the Hilton.

My room came with a view—sort of. While the door opened to the pseudo-outdoor walkway, the window overlooked a Shell station and a technical college that were the motel's nearest neighbors to the north. The view didn't exactly exude a hearty welcome to Los Angeles, though. The gas station was ribboned off with yellow police tape, imprinted with the words "CRIME SCENE – DO NOT CROSS". You hear about horrible crimes at convenience stores **[there was a murder at a convenience store in Algona just a few months ago]**, and I suppose something happened here. I never see a mention of it in the newspapers or hear about it on TV, though. I suppose that sort of crime just isn't news in a place like this.

After settling into my room and cooling off a bit in the air conditioning (funny after leaving the chilly Midwest this morning), I set out to explore the neighborhood. I figured the crime scene to the north was best avoided, so I set out south down Vermont Avenue. Vermont is the major shopping strip for blocks and blocks of apartments in eastern Hollywood. The four-lane street is lined with the Los Angeles trademark—two-story minimalls with microscopic parking lots. In addition to chain stores and restaurants, the minimalls featured ethnic grocery stores, furniture stores, pawnshops, second hand stores, and "Envios" (places that will wire money to other countries). The hotel was on the border of L.A.'s Koreatown (supposedly the largest concentration of Korean people outside Asia, but also home to middle class Mexican-Americans who have lived here for generations) and east Hollywood, which is filled with recently arrived dirt poor Central American immigrants of questionable legal status. Vermont Avenue is also home to some of the L.A.'s largest hospitals and its largest car dealerships, and this brings people of every race from throughout the city and suburbs. The street is packed with cars and buses, and the subway runs beneath, but walking is still a major mode of transportation on Vermont Avenue. As an Anglo man I was certainly unique in the throng of stocky Hispanic women, but I was certainly not alone as a pedestrian.

I walked about half a mile south to the corner of Vermont and 3<sup>rd</sup>, which comes across as a huge parking lot divided in fourths by two busy streets. Two corners house car dealers and the other two are home to major supermarkets. I went into one of the supermarkets, Vons (one of California's major grocery chains **[the local nameplate for Safeway]**). It was especially interesting to walk into this particular Vons because I had just finished reading about it in the book I had read on the plane. This was the start of a commitment the chain made to re-development in the inner city. For years major chains had avoided inner city neighborhoods, leaving the residents with little choice but to shop at convenience stores at inflated prices. The poorest people ended up paying the highest prices for their groceries. Vons made a commitment to open twenty stores in inner city neighborhoods. The Vermont/3<sup>rd</sup> store (which opened in 1990) was the first of these, and it is today the most profitable store in their chain. The brand new Ralph's store across the street (Ralph's is the other big southern California supermarket chain) shows that the location is indeed a good one. (Apparently they were not as successful at some of their other urban locations. They had three stores that shut down within three years of opening their doors, and they never did reach their goal of twenty inner city stores.)

Vons was greeted fairly warmly when they expanded into the inner city. The other chain that has tried to tap that market in L.A., Wal-Mart, received a much colder greeting. Wal-Mart opened their first store in a city of over a million people about five years ago in an abandoned shopping mall in L.A.'s Crenshaw district. Unlike in small towns, where the worry is about putting other stores out of business, in Los Angeles, the furor at Wal-Mart was over wages. Los Angeles has traditionally been a strong union town. Vons' employees are unionized, as are the employees at the many K-Mart stores around the city. Wal-Mart is well known for being fiercely anti-union, and the wages they offered were about half the going rate. While they staffed the store, there are still posters on lampposts around Los Angeles that urge people (in both English and Spanish) to boycott Wal-Mart because of their low wages.

**[Unions have been in the center of the news this winter, with the governor of Wisconsin battling to end rights of teachers, prison guards, and other public sector workers in that state. As our country moves to a post-industrial economy, labor no longer has the public sympathy that sweatshops and grimy factories once brought. It's clear from the governor's dictatorial stance, though, that workers still need support—and those in government jobs may need it more than anyone else. The problem on both sides, of course, is greed. Unions have become unpopular because to many they symbolize corruption and pettiness. The anti-union movement, on the other hand, is all about keeping money for the wealthy rather than spreading it throughout society.]**

The Vermont/3<sup>rd</sup> Vons was a very nice store. It reminded me of the Dahls stores they used to have in Des Moines or the Dominick's stores in Chicagoland. **[Dominick's is also owned by Safeway.]** The aisles were carpeted, and everything was immaculate. It came across as sort of an island of elegance in a rather seedy neighborhood. The grocery selection definitely reflected the cultural mix of the neighborhood. In addition to the standard items you'd find in any supermarket, there were aisles and aisles of assorted ethnic foods—not just the Goya and LaChoy displays I'd find at my local Fareway, but a whole aisle stocked with nothing but various brands and types of tortillas and another with cans labeled in Korean that contained God knows what. There was also an enormous selection of fresh produce, far larger than I've seen in any other supermarket. Interesting in the multi-ethnic food mix was the fact that the signs at Vons were printed in English only.

I bought some cheese and some beverages at Vons. In particular I bought a half gallon of delicious freshly squeezed orange juice and two two-liter bottles of Mexican pop that was "MADE IN USA". Jarritos apparently has a bottling plant right here in Los

Angeles, though their “manzana” and “toronja” taste just like the apple and grapefruit-flavored pop I had south of the border years ago. One of the bottles broke as the checker ran it over the scanner, spraying apple-flavored soda all over the place. Almost instantly an army of clean-up people descended on the counter to remove the mess. **[It was a two-liter plastic bottle, so there was no shattered glass, but the mess of pop went everywhere. I’ve never seen a plastic bottle before, but I suppose this one must have been somehow defective. The stock boys did clean it up in no time, though, and almost instantly one brought up another bottle of “Jarritos manzana” for me.]**

The shoppers at Vons were an eclectic mix of Angelinos. There were quite a few Anglos in the store, mostly elderly people who looked one step away from being homeless. There were also quite a few Asians, but the definite majority was Hispanic. The clerk who checked me out was a middle-aged black woman, and the bag boy was a Hispanic teenager with bleached hair spiked like Bart Simpson.

I lugged my rather heavy purchases back to the motel **[something that would have been easier a year or two later, after cloth grocery bags became more common]**, relaxed for a few more minutes in the air conditioning, and then set out again. I went back to the subway station and took a very crowded train (... and they say no one ever rides the subway in L.A.) to the end of the line in North Hollywood. My fellow passengers were mostly Asian, with a few black and Hispanic people thrown in. They were obviously on their way home to the San Fernando Valley from blue collar jobs in central L.A.

At North Hollywood I made my way to the surface (another **long** string of escalators) and then out to the busway. I waited just a few minutes for bus #156, which mostly runs down Burbank Boulevard in the Valley. The bus was about three-fourths full when we left the station, with almost all the passengers of east Asian descent. After about ten minutes we stopped at beside a junior high school that had just gotten out for the afternoon. Kid after kid after kid crammed on board, until I literally couldn’t see out anything but the side window by which I was sitting. The majority of these kids were also Asian, but there were also a fair number of blacks and Hispanics among them. I was amused to see that the girl nearest me was carrying the exact same algebra book that our ninth graders use. **[I’ve been to several cities where kids took public transit—rather than yellow school buses—to get to school, and it always seems a very strange concept to me. I suppose city people take it for granted, though.]**

Fortunately the kids rapidly drained out of the bus, most transferring to other buses at the major cross streets we passed. By the time I reached my destination, Coldwater Canyon Boulevard, it was still standing room only, but at least I could see the sign so I knew to pull the cord. As it turned out a large number of the remaining kids got off with me.



**“Great Wall of L.A.” – Valley Community College, Los Angeles, California**

My reason for coming here was to see what is billed as the world’s largest mural. The concrete lined branch of the Los Angeles River **[actually Tujunga Wash]** that runs next to Coldwater Canyon Boulevard is lined for a full mile with an enormous mural that tells the complete history of California. It was painted as a graffiti-prevention project about thirty years ago and is now maintained by a community college that owns the land. I walked northward and saw the state’s history from Indian times to the gold rush. I wasn’t really ambitious enough to follow it all the way into modern times, though, so I just turned around and went back to the bus stop. Some

of the mural was covered by water, since they'd had more than their share of rain in recent weeks here. It was fascinating to see "The Great Wall of L.A." once, but I don't know that I'll be rushing back there again.

**[This particular trip would have been easier a couple years later. Shortly after this trip MTA opened what they called the orange line, a "super-bus" line that runs in a dedicated right of way that used to be a freight railroad. Originally proposed as an extension of the red line, the orange line switched to a busway to save money. The route runs just south of here, and there is a stop on it for Valley College.]**

The kids who had gotten off with me had transferred to bus #167, which runs along Coldwater Canyon. They had caught a bus almost immediately after they got off the first one, and that bus was likely rather full. I, on the other hand, caught the next bus on line #167, and for most of the way I was the only passenger on board. In fact the driver (a young black man who played the radio too loud as he drove) seemed surprised that anyone was there to catch the bus. We made very good time as we passed through the pleasant residential neighborhoods of Valley Village and Studio City (both of which are part of the city of Los Angeles). I got off the bus at Moorpark Avenue and walked from there about half a mile south to Ventura, the main drag of the south Valley. I crossed a very full branch of the Los Angeles River, and I passed the South Valley Waterworks and a fire station that looked almost identical to "Station 51" from *Emergency* en route.

I had an early dinner at a place called Baja Fresh in a two-story minimall near the corner of Coldwater Canyon and Ventura. This chain is to Mexican food what Culver's is to burgers and ice cream; it's an expensive and upscale version of fast food. I had some tasty fajitas and sampled their six different homemade salsas—all superb. I also downed an enormous lemonade to replace the liquid I had sweated away on this hot, humid afternoon. **[This was among the first of several times I checked out an unfamiliar restaurant chain thanks to my school's scrip program. I likely wouldn't have stopped into Baja Fresh on a whim, and I certainly wouldn't have gone out of my way to find them. I came across them on the "What's New" page of the scrip website, though, and the chain intrigued me. With a \$10 prepaid gift card, this meal was essentially "free". I've since used scrip cards to check out a number of other places while traveling.]**

Ventura Boulevard is one of the busiest streets I have seen anywhere. It is choked with traffic that barely crawls along. Right outside Baja Fresh I boarded the single most crowded transit vehicle I have ever been on in my life, one of the city's fleet of "rapid" buses (the quotation marks are necessary on this gridlocked boulevard) that stop only about every half mile. I had seen buses like this in Mexico City, but this was the first time I'd ever crammed so close myself. I thought the driver might just declare the vehicle full and run express **[something I've seen in other places]**, but he let everyone who wanted to cram on do so. I squashed my way into the aisle with everyone else. It amazed me the tires didn't pop from all the weight on board that bus.

I had a surprisingly good view out the front window on this bus, so I saw the strange sight that is Ventura Boulevard. For about a two mile stretch it's like an upscale mall built with store entrances on the street. The street is lined with retailers like Tiffany and Cartier, plus furriers and designed-to-order furniture dealers. The low end of the businesses along here are places like American Eagle and Aeropostale—the most expensive places in the malls I'm used to. **[It is really strange that these businesses are located in individual buildings along an extremely busy street, rather than in a mall. They seem to want to have the feel of a downtown area, though outside of New York or Chicago you'd I doubt any of them have a "downtown" location anywhere in the country.]**

People got on and off the bus at every stop, but the crowd continued all the way to the end of the line at Universal City station. As we got off we could see two equally crowded buses stop right behind us, and the westbound buses that were leaving the terminal were already full when they started. (... And they say no one takes the bus in L.A.)

The subway platform at Universal City was just about as crowded as the rapid bus. I made my way to the far end, where there was just a bit of open space. I boarded the last car on a southbound train, which where I managed to get the last available seat. A woman who stood in the aisle intrigued me by the bag she was carrying. She was a stocky, but elegantly dressed, middle-aged Asian woman. Her shopping bag was from Abercrombie and Fitch and featured a muscular blond boy wearing nothing but boxer shorts. It was most decidedly not this woman the store intended as their target customer. Indeed, I'd love to know what she bought there. **[I've seen countless unlikely people toting Abercrombie bags all over the country, most recently in New York. I can't make too much of it, though, because I've bought A & F clothes myself (they do sell high quality goods), and no one would mistake me for the young studs on their advertising either. I will say I've never gotten one of their bags because my purchases have only been online. I think I'd feel VERY out of place in one of their stores.]**

The Asian woman and I both got off at Vermont/Beverly, as did about fifty other people. I went up to my motel room and changed into better clothes. Then I took another crowded train back to the Hollywood/Highland station. I walked past the familiar projected eyes that had greeted Margaret and me a few years back and made my way up the escalators to Hollywood Boulevard.

My first stop was at one of the newest attractions in Hollywood, a place I'd read about online called the Erotic Museum. It is exactly what its name implies, and where better than seedy Tinseltown to have such an institution. It's certainly not the type of place Miss Manners would visit, but I'm not ashamed to say I found it fascinating. **[This place was not a long-lived attraction. According to Wikipedia it closed its doors in early 2006, about a year after it opened. Strangely their website is still online, but it hasn't been updated since 2005 and still lists "coming attractions" that were scheduled to open five years ago. I've read that a similar museum in New York has also been struggling.]**

There's an interesting mix of stuff in the place, ranging from historic to artistic to suggestive to pornographic to bizarre—with many items covering at least two of those categories. My \$14.95 ticket entitled me to watch a multimedia presentation on the history of erotica, from prehistoric times through classic pornography such as *Deep Throat* and *Debbie Does Dallas* and on into a truly obscene

vision of a robotically sexual future. Following that is a historic artifacts gallery, with items ranging from overtly fertility idols from the south Pacific and Africa to an original copy of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* to personal memorabilia of actors and writers who were known as much for their sex lives as for their books and movies to an old nickel movie machine that showed "obscene" pictures of a couple kissing. The stairs are lined with original paintings by Picasso and Dali that are supposedly erotic, but in fact were so abstract as to be more amusing than anything. Hanging above the stairs was an original Playboy bunny costume, so conservative by today's standards I could imagine a middle-aged woman wearing it on the street (minus the ears, of course). Elsewhere was one of Hugh Hefner's own silk bathrobes and the gown Marilyn Monroe took off for the first *Playboy* centerfold spread **[photos that were originally done for a calendar well before Norma Jean Baker was famous; *Playboy* purchased them right when her career was taking off].**

Upstairs things turned from erotic to truly pornographic. A large section was devoted to the porn industry in Los Angeles, which they pointed out produces far more films each year than any of the "major" studios. There were exhibits showing what life is like for the "actors" and "actresses" of the genre—not really seedy, but also in no way glamorous; for most of them it's just a job. They had a map of L.A. showing the location of the various porn studios. They are concentrated in the San Fernando Valley, not far from where I had been earlier today. There are also a few in west L.A. (which apparently specializes in gay porn) and others in the suburbs. Most tend to be in better neighborhoods, about as far as you could get from the places that screen their productions. **[Actually, even in 2005 almost none of the adult films produced in L.A. was actually shown in a theatre. Pretty much all are direct to video productions designed to be viewed in the privacy of one's own home. The main "order fulfillment" centers for the industry are in—of all places—South Dakota.]**

Also upstairs were displays of various sexual aids from medieval times through the present. The collection of modern-day rubber and metal "toys" was certainly eye-opening; there were some things for which I couldn't even imagine a purpose. They had slides and eight-millimeter film loops of "classic" erotica from the '40s through the '60s, as well as phones you could pick up to hear "phone sex"—a concept that has never really made much sense to me. There was also a "reading room" (that I just walked through quickly) with a variety of explicit publications that would make *Playboy* seem like *Reader's Digest* and a collection of nude photographs ranging from artistic to obscene.

The main problem this museum had was that it really wasn't very well organized. The concept was interesting, but it came across as a bunch of junk thrown together, kind of like a flea market of sexually-themed goods. They'd do well to spend some of that steep admission money to higher a designer to re-do the place so they exhibits told a story. As it was the museum mostly came across like the junk in some pervert's attic—which may well have been what it was.

My main event of the evening would be seeing a play. It really didn't take much time to go through the Erotic Museum, so I still had quite a bit of time left before the theatre would open. I decided to entertain myself with a walk down neon-lit Hollywood Boulevard. I'd never been brave enough to venture down the boulevard of broken dreams at night before, though—if tonight was any indication—there's no reason I shouldn't have. The street is lined with a strange variety of stores catering to foreign tourists, destitute locals, and wealthy college-age kids who come to Hollywood from the suburbs to experience the hottest dance clubs in California. **[Actually I gather Hollywood Boulevard is "second string" in the club world; the best clubs are apparently line Sunset and Santa Monica.]** Entertaining all of them are a variety of religious zealots **[mostly Scientologists]** and political crazies pushing mimeographed literature.

I walked to Hollywood and Vine and then back down the other side of the street to the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel where Margaret and I had stayed on our earlier trip. I then crossed the street to the courtyard of the Chinese Theatre, which was full of people in sci-fi costumes celebrating the premiere of some movie I'd never heard of. I elbowed my way past them and on to the Hollywood and Highland complex. This place was under construction when Margaret and I were here, and I saw the outside of it when I'd come here on the baseball trip a couple years ago. This time I was going inside. Most of the place is basically an upscale mall with the same stores you'd see in Coralville or West Des Moines. The main difference is that the public area between stores is an open air courtyard filled with palm trees rather than an enclosed atrium. In the courtyard are enormous concrete elephants painted gold. They are apparently patterned after props from some old movie, but I can't say it's anything I've ever seen.

Near the back of the complex is the Kodak Theatre, which just a couple weeks before I was here hosted the Oscars. The theatre came across as a gilded wonder on TV, a modern imitation of the great old vaudeville theatres. In person it's **[MUCH]** less spectacular. It's extremely vertical (with balcony after balcony rising to the rafters), and is mostly an oppressive red color from the fact that almost every surface is covered in maroon velvet. There is a display of lights on the ceiling that form what almost look like Olympic rings. What stood out, though, was that one of the lights there was burned out. It would certainly be a challenge to change a light on so high a ceiling, but it just seems tacky to leave it that way. I sure hope it was working for the Oscars. **[This is an advantage old-fashioned chandeliers have over modern fixtures. The sea of lights and flickering crystal in a chandelier can cover up one or two bulbs that are out, while individual dots of light that form a pattern call attention to anything missing.]**

I was here to see a traveling production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. I saw that show in Chicago several years ago with Ann-Margaret (much aged from the last time I'd heard of her) as the madam of the title establishment. This show **[i.e.: the L.A. production]** was a sort of second string touring company with a very young cast most of whom were not even members of Actors Equity. They did a nice job, though I must confess I was too tired to really appreciate the whole show. **[While they always call attention to any famous names they can, most Broadway shows are designed so the performances will be virtually identical regardless of who is in the cast.]**

The strangest thing about this show was that there was virtually no audience. The Kodak theatre probably seats a couple thousand, but there were maybe one-tenth that in attendance tonight. I'd think a Friday night performance of a traveling musical would come close to being a sell-out, but that sure wasn't true in Hollywood. There were a handful of couples scattered around the main floor

with the rest of the audience (including me) up in the cheap seats of the uppermost balcony. In between there were hundreds and hundreds of empty seats. **[There have been a couple of other times I've been in theatres that were far less than capacity, most recently for a performance of *South Pacific* in the Chicago area. In the Midwest when this has happened, they've re-assigned people to better seats and in one case literally curtained off the balcony to make the theatre look smaller. It's got to be awkward for the actors to play to an empty theatre, so they try their best to make it seem like a good crowd.]**

With all those empty seats, I ended up being sandwiched between other people. To my right was a young gay couple. I couldn't help but ponder just what they thought of the plot of the show; it would certainly be a unique perspective. To my left was an elderly couple from Texas. Almost everyone in the theatre was a tourist. They obviously don't market well to the local people, which seems strange to me.

Getting up at 4:00 after a very restless night made me extremely tired tonight. The first act of *Whorehouse* is much longer than the second, so it was after 10:00 by intermission. At that point I could barely keep my eyes open, so I went outside with the smokers but just kept on walking. I've seen the second act before, and I don't know that I missed a whole lot this time.

The subway runs every 20 minutes late at night, and I had apparently just missed a train. There were an amazing number of people on the platform at 10:30 at night, a mixture of Hispanic women going home from sales jobs in Hollywood's tourist-oriented stores and scantily-dressed high school kids of all races who were out on dates. **[It's kind of strange to think of going on a date on the subway, but I suppose that must be fairly common in urban areas.]** Eventually a train came, and I got back to Vermont/Beverly without incident. I watched the local news on TV and went to sleep around 11:30.

## **Saturday, March 12**

I was up this morning before 6am. I had planned to sleep slightly later, but the alarm clock went off blaring Korean music (or strange music in some Asian language—I can't say for certain it was Korean). I showered and dressed and left the motel around 6:30—well before their complementary breakfast started. **[Something that frequently annoys me at hotels is that breakfast typically starts later on weekends—often at 7am. I'm almost always up early when I travel, weekend or not, so I often miss the weekend breakfasts.]**

To avoid messing with the metro vending machines, I instead boarded the Vermont Avenue rapid bus. On Saturday morning this was far less crowded than the rapid I had taken yesterday afternoon. Even so, almost every seat was full.

The bus driver gave me a different kind of day pass than I had yesterday. The vending machines dispense small cardboard tickets. The back is printed with a design of gold "M"s, and the front is printed with the date when the pass was purchased. On the bus they give a slip of flimsy paper printed in garish blue and yellow holographic ink with the day of the month. It looks as if in theory you could use the same pass one month later, though perhaps they change the color of ink from month to month. **[They've since changed their fare media in Los Angeles. Apparently now all passes are loaded on smart cards that emit low level radio waves that are read by receivers on the buses and in the train stations. The smart card is dispensed when you buy a pass in a train station (or from neighborhood vendors), and you can use cash to reload a previously purchased smart card at the farebox on a bus.]**

I took the rapid south about a mile to Wilshire and Vermont. One of the biggest subway stations in the system is located right at this corner. Unfortunately it was next to impossible to enter the station. The main plaza was boarded off for a construction project. Apparently they're building a new condominium development right on top of the station. I had to weave around to the far northeast corner where the handicapped entrance was located. It was enough of an ordeal to get people up and down that elevator on a Saturday morning; I'd hate to see it at a weekday rush hour.

I boarded the subway and took the train to Union Station, the east end of the line. I walked upstairs into the main part of the station and then went to the first train platform. There I boarded the new gold line, which runs from downtown to Pasadena. When the L.A. metro system was originally conceived, the blue line was supposed to continue in the subway through downtown and then extend northeast to Pasadena. They ran out of money after they built the first segment of the blue line, and at that point there was strong opposition to building additional lines. Once the red and green lines were completed and it became clear that people were actually using the trains, there was a renewed push to build the Pasadena extension. However, instead of building the subway extension, they pretty much skipped the downtown segment and just built a line from Union Station on out to the suburbs. It was much cheaper and quicker to build, but it means multiple transfers are required to get almost anywhere. **[That is the main problem with transit in L.A.—you can get pretty much anywhere, but it will almost certainly require a transfer.]**

The yellow line **[it is called gold, not yellow]** was opened two years ago, and over the next five years it will be extended (mostly via subway) into densely populated East L.A. **[That extension opened slightly behind schedule, and much of it was re-aligned to street level rather than subway.]** They're also building one additional line, going from the south end of downtown west to U.S.C., Culver City, and Venice beach. Between that and a variety of extensions of the rapid bus network, this allegedly car-bound city will have one of the most comprehensive transit systems in the country.

Building the rails and buying the new rapid buses is being done with the same federal money Minneapolis used to build the Hiawatha line **[money that has largely dried up under President Obama (who doesn't have ties to transportation manufacturers like his predecessor did)—and particularly under the Republican Congress]**. Also like the Twin Cities, L.A.'s transit system comes nowhere near paying for its day to day operations. However California has made the decision that it will subsidize transit—pretty much no matter what it costs. **[Actually the biggest part of the subsidy comes from Los Angeles County, paid for with**

**sales and property taxes.]** That allows them to have a base fare of just \$1.25 and all-day passes that cost just \$3. At that the fares are steep for many of the passengers. Apparently fare evasion is a serious problem with those “honor system” tickets. The passengers learn where the ticket checkers are likely to be (like on the platforms at Rosa Parks station, which is right next to a sheriff’s office) and just avoid those areas. **[They have apparently begun to install turnstiles in the busiest stations to help with fare enforcement and also to cut down on crime in the stations.]**

The gold line uses sleek, futuristic cars. They contrast greatly to the boxy vehicles that run along the blue line. These cars weren’t running very often while I was there, though. About a week before I arrived there was a mudslide that took out the tracks of one section of the line. By the time I arrived they had restored one of the tracks, but they were still working on the other. With just one track running through the construction area, trains could run only every 20 minutes in each direction. That made for rather full cars (though not nearly so full as on the red or blue lines) and inconvenient schedules.



**Website image of a gold line train  
Chinatown station – Los Angeles, California**

The train leaves Union Station on an elevated structure that heads to the northwest. It goes right in front of a public housing complex Margaret and I recognized as a landmark when we were here before and then directly above the yard of the county jail. It turns a tight corner and stops above a street in the heart of L.A.’s Chinatown, which is just east of (though a long uphill walk from) Dodger Stadium. The tracks quickly descend to surface level. They cross the Los Angeles River (which was full of rushing water after the recent storms) and continue at grade through neighborhoods of densely packed bungalows in the northeast corner of the city. Through much of this area the train runs right on the street or in a guideway just beside the street. The trains move quite fast, and it wouldn’t surprise me if they have the same kind of accidents here they’ve had on the blue line. Their goal was to build the line cheaply, though—not to have the safest possible route.

Between L.A. and Pasadena the train runs right at the foot of some mountains. This is where the mudslide occurred. In southern Pasadena it descends to an open trench and picks up speed. In some places (including one station) buildings have been built on top of the right-of-way, so you have the feeling of being in a subway without really being underground. After passing through a small tunnel, the train ends up in the median of I-205, the Foothill Freeway. This is a really strange location. Both halves of the freeway are built up on embankments, while the train running below them in the middle in what amounts to a big concrete trench. I was hoping to get a feel for what Pasadena was like as I passed by, but all I could see were the retaining walls for the two halves of the freeway.

I got off at Lake Street, about two stops from the end of the line. I exited the station and walked north about half a mile to Orange Grove Avenue, then about a mile west. The neighborhood here was interesting, and not something my Midwestern eyes were used to. It’s a suburban area with almost a small town feel, full of two-story homes on wooded lots. What made this different from a place like Algona was that almost everyone who lived here was Hispanic. In the Midwest we don’t really think of middle class Hispanic people, but in California that’s a major part of the population.

I stopped for coffee and a bite to eat at a Winchell’s doughnut shop. The workers here were all Asian, and pretty much none of them spoke English. The mostly Hispanic customers spoke both English and Spanish, but not a word of Korean or Chinese. Everyone, myself included, ordered by pointing—not exactly the most efficient method of service.

I walked south through downtown Pasadena, which is really quite substantial. I wrote when I was here before that Pasadena reminded me a lot of Evanston. It’s also a lot like Iowa City. The downtown area combines the restaurants, bars, and book shops you’d find in a college town with offices for a variety of financial services companies. Things were pretty dead on Saturday morning, but I still had a pleasant stroll.

I ended up at Memorial Park station, which is beneath a senior apartment complex just west of downtown Pasadena. (I tried to imagine the building where my Aunt Alaire lives with a subway station in its basement.) I took the gold line back to Union Station, where I paused for a minute to get some cash from an ATM—one of the few in Los Angeles that’s out in the open where it’s easy to get to. **[Presumably for security, most are locked inside the lobbies of banks and other buildings.]**

My next destination was in the city of Glendale, just a short ways north of downtown L.A. and just west of Pasadena. Metro trains don’t go to Glendale, but the Metrolink commuter train does. I went to yet another complicated vending machine and bought a single zone one-way ticket that cost almost as much as the MTA day pass. Perhaps needless to say no one on Metrolink ever asked to see that ticket.

You may recall that Metrolink and Glendale were all over the news shortly before I went to L.A. A disturbed man who said he wanted to send a message to his estranged wife parked an SUV on the tracks in Glendale at rush hour one morning in February. An inbound train hit the SUV, which caused the train to derail and run into the path of an outbound train that was passing the same spot at

the same time. Eleven commuters were killed, and more than 180 were seriously injured. I'd be taking that same train line, though I was getting off just short of the crash site. Such an accident does make one think, though.

It's about a fifteen minute trip from Union Station to Glendale, the first stop on the line. I walked east a couple of blocks to Glendale's biggest tourist attraction, Forest Lawn Cemetery. This enormous complex combines the elements of a park, an art museum, and a tourist trap with a rather sterile cemetery. The final resting place of countless famous people, Forest Lawn is full of original statuary. Its mausoleums are filled with reproductions of famous paintings, and the faux Tudor chapels feature elegant stained glass. I can't say this is a place I'd want to spend eternity, though. It's one of those cemeteries where the markers are all identical and only certain kinds and amounts of flowers are allowed on the graves—much like where my Aunt Lois and Uncle Dale are buried. It also comes across as more pretentious than friendly.



**Main gate at Forest Lawn Cemetery – Glendale, California**

I can also assure you that Forest Lawn is in no way friendly to pedestrian visitors. The winding roads go up and up from the street level entrance, and there are few signs to direct you where to go. While I got the overall flavor of the place, I can't really say I saw much of anything specific. I certainly didn't see the grave of anyone famous; pretty much all of those are roped off so the riff raff can't disturb their eternal slumber. The place was interesting to see, though—if more than a bit overwhelming.

I walked north through downtown Glendale, which is basically a strip of car dealers and pawn shops. The town has some gorgeous and pricey houses, but its downtown area is very much on the seedy side. After the museum I saw yesterday, I was amused to see this poster taped to a lamp post:

<p>EARN BIG BUCKS! <b><u>WANTED – WANTED – WANTED</u></b> ATTRACTIVE CAUCASIAN MEN AGE 18 – 24 GET A START IN THE WORLD OF ADULT ENTERTAINMENT. CALL ###-####</p>
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I'd probably fail to qualify on two of those counts ("attractive" and "18 – 24"), so I guess I'd have to pass on that wonderful opportunity. I remembered that Glendale was one of the places on that porn map of L.A. they had at the Erotic Museum. I also remembered from the museum that "big bucks" was not really an accurate description of the income earned by most people who work in adult entertainment. While the "stars" of pornography (I'm not sure I knew there was such a thing) can earn as much as \$10,000 a film (and even that is small change compared to what big name actors earn for "real" movies), most people get a few hundred dollars for about a week's work. This is also one of the few "jobs" where women earn more than men do—about double, apparently.

I stopped at another doughnut shop, which again had an exclusively Asian staff. This time, though, the customers were also Asian. I'm not sure anyone in the place spoke English besides me, but I again managed to place my order by pointing and smiling. It occurred to me here that part of the reason I really like Los Angeles is that it gives the feeling of being in a foreign country without having to actually travel abroad **[which is precisely what a lot of other people hate about the place]**.

The Asians at the doughnut shop were fairly typical in Glendale, which came across as one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the metro area. It's one of the few places in greater L.A. where Hispanics are not in the majority. Asians are probably the single largest group, followed by the white people the pornographers were trying to recruit, with blacks and Hispanics in about equal proportions behind those groups. Glendale is obviously a very wealthy place, in spite of all the pawn shops. The real estate flyers showed homes starting "around 1.5" (million, that is) and one bedroom apartments for around \$1000 a month.

I hate to say it, but since I was only a couple of blocks away, I chose to walk to the site of the Metrolink crash. There's absolutely nothing to see there—just a standard rail crossing right on the border of Los Angeles and Glendale. **[They've since erected a memorial near the site.]** The Los Angeles side (to the west) is a neighborhood of dumpy bungalows (like much of the city), while the Glendale side is industrial. It fascinated me that the Glendale Fire Department's disaster training facility was just a block away, though apparently that made no difference when a real disaster happened. According to news reports most of the immediate aid came from workers at a Costco warehouse store in yet another L.A. minimall just to the south.



**Metrolink railroad crossing near San Fernando & Los Feliz – Glendale, California**

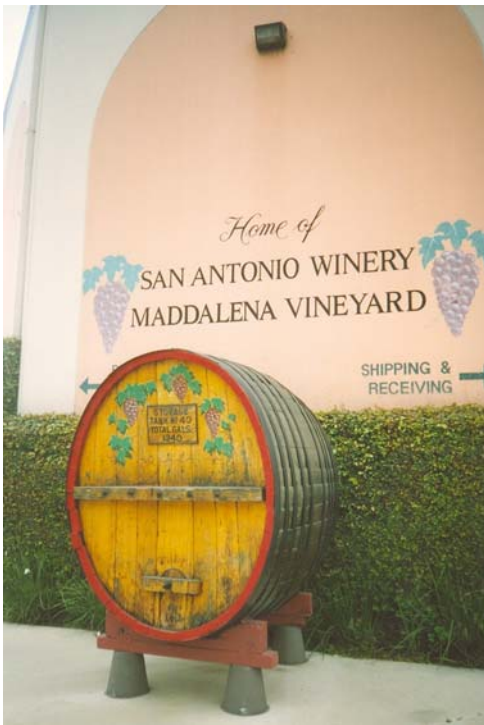
I said a silent prayer and made my way south to San Fernando and Los Feliz, the corner where that minimall is located. Metrolink has a very limited schedule on weekends, so I knew it would be quicker to take a bus back to Los Angeles. I chose bus #96, which runs down San Fernando Road and then weaves its way into central L.A. When I boarded a black woman of about college age in a motorized wheelchair was blocking much of the aisle. I squeezed my way past her and took a seat toward the center of the bus. The driver of the bus was Hispanic and apparently spoke no English, while the black girl spoke no Spanish. A young Hispanic girl who spoke both languages served as an interpreter between them, since the driver needed to know when the handicapped girl needed to get off. After a lengthy discussion, it was decided that she would be getting off at Figueroa, one of the main streets of central L.A. It was amusing that the Hispanic girl pronounced the street as fee-gay-ROW-ah in careful Spanish, while the handicapped girl said something closer to "fuh-GROW-uh". The Figueroa stop turned out to be next to an IHOP restaurant, and the girl wheeled herself right into IHOP, apparently taking the bus to breakfast.

I got off in the middle of Chinatown and walked east under the gold line tracks to bus stop in one of the bleakest urban neighborhoods I've ever seen. All four corners of the intersection of Main and Spring streets were fenced or walled in. On one corner was the county jail, on another a storage lot that seemed to be full of abandoned police cars, a third was the downtown storage facility for Budget car rentals, and the fourth (where the actual bus stop was) just seemed to be a big walled-in empty lot. Fire station #1 was right down the street, and there were a variety of truck yards and warehouses in the nearby area. I was just down the hill from picturesque Chinatown and just up the hill from Union Station, but the immediate vicinity was certainly nowhere special.

I had a long wait at this bus stop. Bus #74 is supposed to run about every 30 minutes on Saturdays. I must have just missed one bus, and the next one must have been late. It was closer to 45 minutes that I waited in the middle of nowhere. It's probably fortunate that for most of the time I was literally the only person in the neighborhood.

I could probably have walked to my destination in far less time than I waited for the bus. That would have required about a mile of walking through a neighborhood much the same as where I was waiting, though—which didn't seem especially appealing to me. When the bus finally came, I rode about a mile north, just across the Los Angeles River, to Lamar Street. I walked south on Lamar past a cement factory and a parking lot full of brown trucks, the regional headquarters of UPS.

So why was I wandering around on foot in the area Margaret and I took to calling "industrial hell" when we were here before? ... To see—of all things—a winery. I had read online that back before it was lined with concrete, the Los Angeles River was lined with dozens of wineries. All but one of those closed during Prohibition. The San Antonio Winery survived (by making sacramental wine), and today it remains on the same site that it's been for nearly a century. No one grows grapes in Los Angeles any more, nor anywhere near here for that matter. San Antonio brings in grapes from vineyards near Paso Robles, just south of San Francisco. They still process, bottle, and age their wine in L.A., though—and maybe the cement dust and diesel fumes add a bit of additional flavor.



**ABOVE: San Antonio Winery  
RIGHT: Cement factory next to the winery  
Los Angeles, California**

I walked back to the bus stop at Main and LaMar. An Asian woman was waiting on the bench there with an elementary school girl I assumed was her daughter and an infant in a stroller. I leaned on a lamppost and waited for the bus to come. It did come—fairly soon this time—and I got on. Oddly, though, the Asian family didn't. What was particularly odd was that bus #74 was the only bus that went by that stop, so it's not as if they were waiting for some other route. Maybe they just like sitting on bus benches.



What made this trip very strange was that the driver, a thirty-something black man with dreadlocks, acted as if he knew me. When I boarded he greeted me with a hearty "Man, it's been a long time, hasn't it?", and he proceeded to carry on a conversation as if I were his long-lost friend. I don't know very many black people, and to my knowledge none of those I do know have ended up driving a bus in Los Angeles. I managed to give a number of non-responses at appropriate intervals, though—and I must say it was entertaining.

I got off the bus near the Civic Center, the governmental complex in the heart of downtown L.A. I made my way to the nearest subway station and took the red line back to Vermont/Beverly. I dumped the wine in my room and then took the subway two stops further north to Vermont/Sunset. Here I made my third trip to one of my favorite fast food restaurants, Fatburger. While it is unquestionably overpriced, Fatburger serves some of the best burgers I've ever tasted. They also have delicious malts and homemade onion rings. My only complaint about the meal was that they didn't salt the onion rings. While I'm sure they thought they were catering to the health conscious (as if truly health conscious people would eat at a place called "Fatburger"), fried foods just taste better if they're seasoned while their hot. Without that fresh from the oil salt, the onion rings were really bland. The burger was outstanding though, and the malt was also most excellent.

I went to the corner of Vermont and Sunset where I waited with a huge crowd at the bus stop. Before long an overly full orange bus (local buses are orange in L.A., as compared to the bright red rapid buses) stopped. Virtually everyone on board got off and exited to the subway station. Unfortunately equally many were waiting to board. I shoved my way to a seat, but I was so boxed in I couldn't see what any of the cross streets were. After what seemed an appropriate amount of time I just pulled the cord and shoved my way to the exit. Amazingly I was at Ivar Avenue, just one stop (two blocks) away from where I had intended to get off.

I made my way to Cahuenga Boulevard and walked south for about half a mile. My destination was the new Los Angeles Fire Museum. Margaret and I had seen the first branch of this museum in the "El Pueblo" historic park when we were here before. Apparently that branch (in the city's first firehouse) still exists, but this one is much larger. It is housed in a building that served as the main fire station **[station #27, which was the largest fire station west of the Mississippi]** for Hollywood for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Different parts of the station are restored as they were in eras ranging from the 1920s through the 1980s. (...And I must say it was a bit of a shock to think of the '80s as historic.) **[The '80s, of course are "historic" in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Things have changed dramatically since then, particularly in fields where technology is at the forefront, such as emergency services.]**

Honestly my goal was just finding the place and confirming that there was indeed a winery in a place I'd more likely expect to find winos. When I got there I had just missed a tour of the bottling facilities, but I can't say I really cared. I've seen that before in both northern California and France; I doubt it's much different in L.A. I did look around the small museum they have near the entrance and I bought a couple bottles of wine to take back as souvenirs. **[These days, with liquids prohibited in carry-on luggage, I wouldn't have been able to take home these souvenirs.]** Margaret and I recently drank them, and I can't say I cared a lot for either. One (a cardinale) was an extremely sweet dessert wine—not at all what I expected. The other was a merlot. Merlot is usually a fairly standard dry red wine. This was certainly dry; in fact it practically burnt going down. That Margaret and I didn't finish the bottle speaks volumes. I ended up finishing the rest mixed with Fresca, a sort of homemade wine cooler.

The first floor of the fire museum features a variety of emergency vehicles in various states of restoration. There's everything from horse-drawn pumpers to those old hearse-like ambulances to enormous ladder trucks from more modern times. The vehicles are being restored by retired firefighters, many of whom were working on their treasures this afternoon.

Upstairs, in the former residential quarters, they basically have a collection of collections. There's a collection of fire helmets from around the world (very heavy on Germany), a collection of firefighters' badges, a collection of miniature fire engines, a collection of bad paintings of firefighters, and a collection of children's toys based on the TV show *Emergency*. Just as at the erotic museum, none of these was very well organized. It was basically just a bunch of junk that happened to have a fire theme.

The firefighters' recreation room upstairs now serves as a meeting room. It was in use while I was there for a meeting of some over-dressed middle aged people who came in a bus from some Baptist church. Why a church group would be meeting in a former fire station, I have no idea. They were enjoying finger sandwiches as I walked by, though.



Website photo of L.A. Fire Museum (Station 57) – Los Angeles, California

I left the museum, returned to Sunset, and walked west along the famous boulevard. The most interesting thing along this stretch of Sunset was a place that appeared to be a museum that had huge banners with the message "PSYCHIATRY KILLS" above the entrance. I have no idea what the place was, and while I definitely have a penchant for offbeat attractions, there are limits. **[Apparently this is a museum sponsored by the Church of Scientology, which has had an ongoing feud with the psychiatric community. According to an online review of the place by a fairly neutral outsider, it includes gruesome exhibits on medieval medicine, behaviorism, eugenics, the Holocaust, electroshock therapy, abuse of patients in mental asylums, and the overuse of psychiatric drugs, particularly in education. While all branches of medicine have certainly had their abuses over the years, there appears to be no question but that this place is pure propaganda.]**

Not far west of the psycho psychiatry place was Blessed Sacrament Church, the home parish of every Catholic actor and actress back in the days when stars were stars. The church is still housed in a spectacular building, though today its parishioners are mostly poor Hispanic people. I couldn't go in, because when I passed by a wedding was just getting out. The happy couple left the church in a limousine built on an SUV chassis. The white monstrosity was bigger and more intimidating than any other limo I've ever seen. **[Hummer limos have become more common since this was first written, but they still look ridiculous to me.]**



Crossroads of the World on America's Greatest Hits

Just west of Blessed Sacrament is a local landmark called Crossroads of the World. I first encountered this building on the cover of a record album that the group America produced back in the '70s. It was originally built in the 1930s as a shopping center. The center of the complex is built to resemble an ocean liner, complete with porthole windows and a smokestack. Surrounding it are buildings designed in architectural styles from around the world. It's like a miniature world's fair or a small version of the parade of nations at Disney World. A sign near the entrance advertised "NOW LEASING – UNIQUE OFFICE SPACE". They didn't lie. **[In 2011 the Crossroads website advertises that their office space is "creative", rather than "unique". It's interesting that the area around the complex looks nothing at all like it does on the album cover. While a handful of palm trees do surround the place, there are no evergreens and no grass. It's a very dense urban neighborhood.]**

They were holding auditions for a Spanish-language commercial at Crossroads of the World when I walked

past. A long line of young Hispanic men stretched past a sign telling them to enter from the rear. I remembered that a couple of years ago Sarah Freking, the daughter of some of my friends and co-workers, spent a summer in Los Angeles. Amanda, who is a very attractive young lady, auditioned for a number of commercials and apparently was cast in a couple of them. I wondered if the lines she encountered at auditions were as long as this one.



**L.A. X-Press vending box  
Hollywood, California**

After walking about a mile west from Cahuenga I turned north on Highland Boulevard. This was a familiar neighborhood; I had walked around here many times when Margaret and I stayed at the Roosevelt. I'm writing this in mid-May, and I was amused that just last weekend *Cops* profiled the arrest of a prostitute on this very corner—right outside the In 'n' Out restaurant that boasts "America's first drive-thru". I suppose the ladies must do their thing late at night, because I've never seen them in Hollywood. You can't miss the news boxes for the *L.A. X-Press*, with its thinly veiled ads for "personal models", but I can't say I've seen anyone (man or woman) actually selling themselves [sic.] on the street in L.A. (Barcelona and New Orleans—but not L.A.) Nothing *Cops* would be interested in was happening at Sunset and Highland today either, and I just turned the corner and walked on.

A couple blocks north of Sunset, just south of Hollywood and Highland, is one of the best museums I have ever visited. Called simply the Hollywood Museum, it opened just a couple years ago, and it truly is a treasure. While it was as pricey as the Erotic Museum, this place was definitely worth the admission. It is housed in the Max Factor building, the pink and blue landmark where Max Factor (the actual name of a person) developed modern theatrical make-up. He manufactured his products here, and the stars of old were driven to this location to be made up before each scene of their movies. The first floor of the building is basically a museum of make-up. In addition to telling about Max Factor and displaying his wares, they have preserved the actual rooms where countless starlets were made up. He had different rooms for people of different complexions and hair color, with color and lighting designed to bring out the best in everyone. I forget which colors were supposed to go with which complexion, but I do remember being amazed at how different I looked in the different rooms. It was also fascinating to see photos of all the famous people who had their make-up done in the very chairs I was standing in front of. Beside each picture was a record of precisely what base and accents were best for each person; it must have been an ordeal just to keep all those records.

The make-up floor is just the start of the Hollywood Museum. From there you take an elevator up four levels and wind your way down through almost endless fascinating exhibits. They have a remarkably thorough history of film, television, and recorded music told through authentic memorabilia. It's a lot like the Warner Brothers museum Margaret and I saw when we toured their Burbank studios, but not limited to just one company's productions.

Unlike the museums I complained about earlier, this couldn't have been better organized. The exhibits were grouped so that they complemented each other, and each one told a story. Everything is tastefully displayed so that even the most trivial thing looks like an artifact rather than junk.

Among the most fascinating of those trivial items was the pill bottle that was found by Marilyn Monroe's body after she died. I'd always heard she died of an overdose and supposed it was an overdose of sleeping pills or tranquilizers or something of that sort. In fact the bottle contained hydrochlorothiazide, a diuretic. I take the exact same pills for high blood pressure. Why they were prescribed no one knows (I'd bet she was using them for weight loss), but it's definitely not the kind of drug I picture someone overdosing on.



**Hollywood High School – Los Angeles, California**

I could spend pages describing every little feature of the Hollywood Museum. Suffice to say, if you happen to find yourself in Los Angeles, take the subway to Hollywood and Highland and check it out for yourself. It's not often I recommend people visit tourist attractions, but this one is definitely a must see.

I walked back south on Highland, past Hollywood High School. There's a fascinating mural over the entrance to their auditorium with pictures of the many stars that went to school there. I must confess that the only two I recognized were Judy Garland and Carol Burnett. That may be from bad artwork, though; I'm sure that if I saw the names I'd be more likely to know them.

I walked west on a very familiar stretch of Sunset, passing a string of motels and minimalls as well as the record studio where they recorded "We Are the World". I turned north on LaBrea and stopped for a treat at another familiar place, Mashti Malone. I still don't know the ethnicity of the proprietors of this ice cream parlor, but their sign is in Arabic and English. They have unusual flavors of ice cream that are truly out of this world. I had a scoop of ginger rosewater ice cream in a homemade cone that tasted like a vanilla wafer. It was a nice refreshment on a hot afternoon.

I walked back past the Hollywood Roosevelt to the Hollywood/Highland subway station. I took the train two stops east to Hollywood/Western. Apparently this used to be a very rough part of town, but it is rapidly gentrifying. Here, like at Wilshire/Vermont, they've built a condo complex right above the subway station, and the nearby neighborhood is definitely on the way up. I walked south a few blocks to Sunset (where things are not so nice) and then east for a couple more blocks.

My destination here was the east Hollywood branch of 99¢ Only, the California chain that will sell almost anything for a dollar. I spent over half an hour browsing through the enormous store. I bought almost nothing, but I marveled at all they had in stock. Then I walked back west a couple blocks to another Hollywood institution, a garment outlet. Everywhere you look in Hollywood there are stores selling T-shirts, jeans, and other clothing at absurdly low prices. The place I went into was one of the nicer of these stores. The size of a small department store, they had every kind of clothing imaginable, much of it allegedly "designer" wares. The store (like almost all of these places) advertised 11 T-shirts for \$10, and indeed there was an entire wall stocked with some of the ugliest T-shirts you could imagine, which could be had in bulk for that price (or for \$1.49 each). They had jeans for as low as \$5, boxer shorts for \$1 each, and socks at a dozen pairs for \$5. I briefly considered stocking up on cheap knock-off clothes, but I remembered something I had read in a travel guide. Apparently many of these places make a lot of their money through credit card scams. If you charge something, when the charge comes through an enormous "service charge" is added to the actual price of the goods. I never carry much cash when I travel, and now I had just \$10 on me. I ended up buying two polo-style shirts, each supposedly made by American Eagle (though I'd bet money that company never had any contact with these them). One was orange, the other turquoise; their bright colors seemed fitting for California. They cost a total of \$8 (some of the pricier items in the store) and made a nice souvenir.

I returned to Hollywood/Western and then took the train back to the motel. I pondered as I rode just what the total value would be if I added up all the individual bus and train trips I took today. The \$3 day pass certainly was providing good value to me. **[Of course, if I hadn't had that pass, I'd likely have walked more and taken the bus less.]**

Back at the motel I watched some TV and just lounged around for an hour or so. At about sunset I took the train back downtown and got off at Metro Center. I knew there was an ATM in the Metro Center station (I've written about it—and the fact that it is owned by "Tomatobank"—in earlier travelogues), and I stopped there to get money. I was starting to get a little bit less than stuffed (though far from hungry), so I also decided to have dinner downtown. A few blocks south on Figueroa is the Original Pantry, a landmark restaurant where I had a pleasant breakfast a couple years ago. Supposedly they also have good dinners, and I figured it was as good a place to eat as any.

There was a **long** line by the pantry when I arrived. The line was backed up to the west, and I approached from the north. A guard stood by the entrance on the corner, essentially taking reservations. He asked how many were in my party. When I said "one", he said I could either wait forty-five minutes for a table or go immediately to the counter. While I don't think I've ever eaten at a lunch counter in my life, that was certainly preferable to an endless wait. I went in and sat right down.

Within seconds a gruff young man named Jarred asked what I wanted to drink. I said iced tea, and almost before I had the words out he placed a glass in front of me. He then demanded my order. I knew from experience that there are no paper menus here; instead the menu is scrawled in chalk on the wall. Prepared, I said pork chops, and Jarred smiled—seemingly pleased that I knew the routine. Seconds later he plunked down an enormous loaf of homemade brown bread and a cup of coleslaw. That filled the couple of minutes until an enormous platter of fried pork chops, hash browns, and corn was set in front of me.

Most of the customers at the Original Pantry were sports fans. Apparently the California state high school basketball championships were being held at Staples Center, which is just south of here. **[It's got to be fun for the high school guys to play in an NBA arena.]** Most of the guys at the bar bellowed statistics at each other at the top of their lungs, adding a fascinating bit of local color to the place. The lone exception (other than me) was the man immediately to my left, a twenty-ish Japanese tourist who seemed perplexed at both the type and the enormous quantity of the food he was served. He even photographed his steak, which brought some raised eyebrows from the sports fans. He seemed to enjoy his dinner, though, and I enjoyed mine as well.

I would have been delighted to order dessert (they had peach cobbler written on the menu board, which sounded good), but Jarred plunked down a check without asking if I wanted anything more. I left him a decent tip and made my way to the wooden cashier's cage by the door. The cash register was literally overflowing with cash. I added about \$13 more, and I pondered as I left just how many thousands of dollars this place must take in each day. It's got to be a bundle.

I expected to have to be on my guard walking back to the subway station. This part of downtown is rather deserted even by day, and I was expecting it to be downright creepy at night. It's very well lit, though. The only other people around were some kids who were skateboarding in the plaza in front of a skyscraper, but they didn't seem to care who was walking by. It was a surprisingly pleasant walk.

The red line splits into two branches, and only every other train goes from downtown to Hollywood. **[They've since divided the branches, with one called the purple line.]** Perhaps needless to say, the first train to arrive at Metro Center was destined for the wrong branch. I got on that train anyway and rode as far as Wilshire/Vermont, where the two branches split. In my mind it seemed like I was making progress if I was at least waiting somewhere else. Eventually a Hollywood-bound train arrived.

Like most of the trains in L.A., this one was very crowded. I grabbed a bar and stood as we made our way beneath Vermont Avenue. Nearby was a group of kids I'd guess to be in middle school. They were Hispanic, but they spoke English with the most generic American accents you'd hear anywhere. When the train rounded the corner to turn under Hollywood Boulevard a girl in the group lost her balance and landed on my foot. I've had an ingrown toenail for some time. Most of the time it's not much of a problem, but when someone steps on it, it can be painful. **[It's been quite a while since I've had an ingrown toenail, but at the time I'd been battling them on and off quite frequently.]** I'm sure I was cringing in pain as I faked a grin to assure the girl that everything was all right. A boy next to her gave a snort and said, "rookie" with an air that assured everyone he was an experienced subway rider.

I took the train to Hollywood/Vine, which is across the street from the Pantages Theatre. Margaret and I saw *The Lion King* here when we were in Hollywood before, and again I was here to see a show. When we were here before, we remarked that it was both odd and unfortunate that no one seemed to take the subway to the theatre. That seems to have changed. A lot of people (mostly wealthy-looking couples of all races) rode up the escalator here, and most of them crossed the street to the theatre. Right in front of me was a couple from Pasadena who were taking friends of theirs from the San Francisco area out for a night on the town. The San Franciscans couldn't believe that they used honor system ticketing on the trains. (The Bay Area's BART trains have very secure turnstiles.) The locals pointed out that L.A. is, on the whole, a much poorer city than San Francisco. They put in the honor system because it was cheaper than putting turnstiles everywhere. Certainly there are people who don't pay their fare, but the vast majority do. They fines are steep, and any violation results in an automatic court appearance. The visitors nodded agreement, but their facial expression made it clear they really didn't agree.

The Pantages is a truly gorgeous theatre. I love art deco architecture, and this is a true gem of that style. Most striking is the enormous blue glass chandelier that seems to cover the entire ceiling. The detail on the plasterwork is also gorgeous, and the mostly blue seats have gold threads in them that sparkle in the light. **[The blue is one of the nicest features of the Pantages. So many theatres are a sea of red velvet; it's nice to have some variety in color here.]** The overall effect is really magnificent.

I was sitting in the very back row of the balcony, but right in the center and on an aisle. Next to me was a Korean mother and her two children. The family was apparently planning a vacation in Korea this summer, and at one point the boy asked his mom, "Why can't we go to North Korea?" Mom passed on explaining the realities of global politics to a kid who appeared to be all of about ten years old. Instead she said, "We're just not allowed to."

Tonight's play was *Evita*, the life of Argentina's most famous first lady—set to music. It was most decidedly not my favorite show. While there's plenty of plot to be had in Argentina's bizarre recent history, it really didn't make for an especially captivating play. Add to that the fact that one Andrew Lloyd-Webber song pretty much sounds like another **[his music is good, but it lacks variety]**, and it just wasn't that interesting of a show. It was probably good that I'd scheduled this one tonight and *Whorehouse* last night. I think I'd have literally fallen asleep if I'd gone to *Evita* tired. That said, the actors certainly did an excellent job; it was the show itself I didn't like. So, when at the end the actors asked us to empty our pockets to support "Broadway Cares: Equity Fights AIDS", I complied.

It was around 11:00 when the play let out. I had a long wait at Hollywood/Vine, together with a number of other show-goers. Most of them actually took the train the opposite direction, up to the San Fernando Valley. I went south four stops and got back to the Comfort Inn right at 11:30. I watched a bit of news on the local Fox station and before long was off to bed.

## Sunday, March 13

I had intended to be up around 6:00 this morning, and I assumed that the alarm clock wake me up to Korean music as it did yesterday. Unfortunately that didn't happen, and it was after 7:00 when I woke up. That forced me to make some changes in my plans for the day, but—on the plus side—it did allow me to sample the motel breakfast. Honestly, it wasn't all that great of a breakfast, though. What's more, they required guests to eat it in the breakfast room; we couldn't so much as take a cup of coffee back to our room. I'm not sure what the point of that rule was, but I found it rather annoying. **[A lot of urban hotels seem to have this rule. Perhaps they have a problem with the homeless or other non-guests coming in and helping themselves to food. I'd think they could solve that by having guests present their key (or perhaps unlock a door) to enter the breakfast room to begin with.]**

I took the red line to Union Station. Once there I went out to the



Website photo of Amtrak Pacific Surfliner  
Union Station – Los Angeles, California

courtyard, got out my cell phone, and gave Margaret a quick call. Then I went out to Track #9 and boarded Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner train. I was taking a day trip to San Diego, a place I've never been to before (actually the largest place in America to have that honor **[Phoenix is now the largest place I haven't visited.]**). Amtrak runs about ten trains a day each way between L.A. and San Diego, so this made a convenient (if surprisingly expensive) way to go.

The train was mostly full, but I found a pair of empty seats. Conveniently, no one joined me for the whole three-hour trip. I certainly had plenty of companions in the car, though. When I got on a group of blond college boys who looked and talked like "surfer dude" stereotypes was sitting near the back of the car. What didn't fit the stereotype was what they were talking about. They had a remarkably serious discussion of history and politics—but all punctuated by such exclamations as "whoa, man" and "awesome, dude". I guess you really can't judge a book by its cover.

By the time we reached Fullerton the boys had wrapped up their discussion and went to sleep. At that Orange County station, though, a group of passengers boarded who more than made up for the boys' silence. These people were apparently part of a veterans' group that was having some get-together in San Diego. It made me feel very old that these were **Vietnam** veterans, yet many of them were retired. In my mind veterans should be my father's age, not my sister's. **[It's really kind of scary that most of the kids I teach have GRANDparents younger than the Vietnam era.]**

The veterans and their wives were quite upset that they couldn't find a whole large section where they could sit together on the train. They didn't let that stop them from yakking with each other, though. They were like talkative school kids whose teacher tried to split them up, but who just continued their conversation by bellowing across the room. **[My fourth period Algebra class this semester is exactly like that.]**

The wives mostly discussed redecorating their homes or where they'd be going on upcoming vacations. The vets, on the other hand, reminisced about their glory days during the war and commiserated about their many medical problems—most of which were not war-related. It became rapidly clear that most of these people didn't really know each other very well, and I wondered just what sort of person felt the need to share his medical problems with relative strangers. It amazed me just how many different medications some of these people were on. There were people in their 50s who seemed to be swallowing the pill inventory for an entire nursing home each day. They all seemed to have the attitude that anything medicine could do to make life better was okay. At one point I even heard one man say the words, "Who cares if I'm addicted to it?" in describing an antidepressant he was on. I guess the drug must have done its job; he certainly seemed to have a laid back attitude toward things.

The men also talked about the cars they drove and those they aspired to drive. By their descriptions, I'd surmise that some of these would cost more than I'd want to spend on a house—let alone a car. Obviously Orange County is not a poor place.



**Website photo of Amtrak cheese and cracker tray**

I broke up the trip by heading to the lounge car to buy coffee and a snack tray with cheese and crackers. This cost more than the snack they sold on the airplane, but I liked it a whole lot better. **[The cheese and cracker trays really are quite good value. While they're served in thin plastic trays measuring about 6 by 8 inches, those trays are jam-packed. They provide about four kinds of cheese and sufficient crackers to make a substitute meal. There is a good variety of both crackers and cheese, but all are common enough that almost anyone would like them.]**

The train runs through suburban sprawl for the first half of the trip. Then from San Juan Capistrano southward it hugs the Pacific coast. The beaches were packed today. As we neared San Clemente I couldn't help but notice what looked like surfers everywhere, so many I would think it would be hard to find a place to surf. It turned out that San Clemente was hosting the National Interscholastic Surfing Championships. I don't really think of surfing as a high school sport, but apparently it is in California.

The train turns inland at Oceanside, just past the big Marine Corps base. From there it's pretty much suburban all the way to San Diego. In fact, if it weren't for Camp Pendleton, Los Angeles and San Diego would essentially be overgrown twin cities.

As it is, though, they are separate, and it's fascinating just how different the two metropolitan areas are. I've remarked in earlier travelogues that L.A. is just about the most closely packed place I've been to anywhere. Much of it is best described as suburban, but it's dense suburbs with very little wasted space. San Diego, on the other hand, is the epitome of suburban sprawl. The whole stretch from Oceanside to Solana Beach and on to northern San Diego could as easily be Ankeny or Schaumburg or Inver Grove Heights. I saw endless condo developments, subdivisions full of palatial mansions, strip after strip of "big box" stores, office park after office park, and warehouse after warehouse. It looks a lot like the area west of Chicago along I-88 or the entire Twin Cities beltway. The trees are palms instead of pines and the lawns are all artificially watered, but otherwise it's pretty much the same. There is one big difference I'd discover later, though. In Chicago and the Twin Cities (and also Los Angeles), there's an actual **city** that this sprawl is suburban to. In San Diego, on the other hand, it's basically **all** suburban; what city is there would be dwarfed by Des Moines.

I would rapidly find out that San Diego was one of the strangest places I've ever been. This became evident when I exited the train at the station called "Old Town", which is adjacent to San Diego's "historic district". I use those quotation marks, because there's not much I'd call "historic" about Old Town. I had imagined it would date from one of two eras, either the Mission period when this was

part of colonial Spain or the frontier era of the 1800s. Surprisingly, Old Town looks a lot like Algona. Most of its buildings date to about 1920. It looks different from a lot of California, since it's built of wood and brick instead of stucco, but I really wouldn't call it old. After all, the homes here were built with electricity, running water, and telephone service. By their logic anything that predates computers must be historic.

[In San Diego's defense, most of Old Town is at least as old as "historic" places like Living History Farms—and certainly much older than the condos, McMansions, and strip malls that make up most of San Diego. The bulk of those old Victorians actually do date to the Victorian era (mostly late 1800s), and many of the businesses have the false fronts you might find in an old frontier town in South Dakota. There are even a few sites that date back to colonial days, though almost all the buildings that claim to be from that era are actually 20<sup>th</sup> Century reconstructions. I still didn't care for the place (which is at best a tourist trap), but it is significantly older than I gave it credit for.]



**San Diego Trolley at Old Town Station – San Diego, California**

I didn't really see much in Old Town (since there wasn't much of anything to see). Instead I transferred to the San Diego Trolley. San Diego was the first place in America to install a modern "light rail" system. The trolley dates to the 1970s, and it was the model cities like L.A. and Minneapolis (and Portland, Denver, Dallas, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, etc., etc.) copied when they installed their transit trains. Unfortunately, the system hasn't aged well. The boxy red cars are not old enough to be historic or charming (though the wood-tone leatherette seats are certainly a blast from the past), but they are definitely old enough to look junky and feel uncomfortable. They've apparently done almost no major maintenance since the system was installed. I read a **[rather sensationalized]** newspaper article that described decaying track beds and problems with the train motors, and I was thankful I got around without major problems.

The fare structures on the trains in Los Angeles and San Diego show just how different those cities are politically. L.A.'s heavily minority population mostly is the biggest reason California is a "blue" state; they generally vote Democratic and support liberal points of view. San Diego, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly white and wealthy, and it reliably casts its votes for Republicans and conservative causes. It's not really a surprise that L.A. heavily subsidizes public transit, but San Diego doesn't. In Los Angeles one-way tickets go for \$1.25 tickets, and the day passes cost \$3. The San Diego Trolley, on the other hand, is proud to tell you they generate a higher percentage of their revenue from fares than any other transit system in the country. The lowest fare in San Diego is \$2.50, and it increases to as much as \$4, depending on distance traveled. A day pass here is \$9, an amount that didn't exactly break me, but was hardly what I'd call cheap. As it turns out there is no government subsidy for the San Diego Trolley—zero. What they don't take in from fares, they make up from advertising and concessions that are everywhere on the trains and in the stations. There are two very different philosophies there, and I won't hide the fact that I'm with L.A. on this issue. I think it's silly to have transit that only the wealthy can afford to use; it should be for everybody—and especially for the poor.

I boarded the trolley and set off northeastward in the direction of "MISSION SAN DIEGO", hoping to see the oldest of the California missions. The area the trolley went through looked remarkably like what I had seen on the train earlier this morning—pretty much endless suburban sprawl. Most of the stops along this stretch are at shopping malls; the stops themselves have names like "Fashion Valley". The next to last stop is at Qualcomm Stadium, with Mission San Diego right after that.

I got off at the mission station, but I can't say I really knew where I was. There was certainly nothing about this neighborhood of condos and convenience stores that made me think there'd be a mission anywhere nearby. I did find signs to the mission itself, though, so I started walking in the appropriate direction. I walked about half a mile west through a neighborhood that looked like Coralville, turned at a 7-11, and then went north about another half mile. There was a tiny wooded area among the residential sprawl, and at the top of a hill in the middle of the trees was the actual mission.



**Mission San Diego – San Diego, California**

The mission building is an low-slung old stucco (or perhaps authentic adobe) structure that is hardly a thing of beauty. I'd imagine that inside it looks a lot like the Capistrano mission, but I can't say for sure. I arrived together with an enormous crowd of "yuppie" families that was there for noon mass. Strange as it may seem, the oldest church in California serves as the parish church for wealthy suburban neighborhood. Something that fascinated me is that the mission was just about the only church in California that doesn't offer mass in Spanish. That suits the neighborhood, though. Northern San Diego is lily white.

I made my way back to the station and took the trolley to the area known as "downtown". Again the quotation marks are intentional; San Diego has roughly a million people, but its downtown area ranks right up there with Burlington. To be fair, it's probably a little larger—though Burlington may beat it in height. Downtown San Diego covers about one square mile. The tallest buildings are about three stories, and many are just one floor high. There's apparently a big downtown mall somewhere around here, but it appears to be nowhere near the trolley. What is nearby are thrift shops, discount shoe stores, a blood donation center, and lots and lots of vacant storefronts with homeless people drinking out of paper bags in their entrances. It didn't really come across as dangerous, but it was more than a little on the seedy side.

I was here to see yet another show. This one was at the San Diego Civic Center, which was about a block from one of the downtown trolley stops. The theatre was definitely the least glamorous of the ones I went to on this trip. It was rather obviously built as an urban renewal project back in the '70s. It's a big concrete monstrosity with translucent glass windows and burnt orange upholstery. I took a ramp up and up and up to my seat in the upper balcony, thumbed through the program, and got ready for the show.

so that *Stomp* would fit it. After the "play", I wrote in the notebook I keep to help me when writing these travelogues: "What a piece of \*\*\*\*!!!" (I'll be like President Nixon here and delete the expletive.) Seriously, I've never seen a show I disliked as much as *Stomp*. The audience (mostly young mothers and their children) seemed to be going ga-ga for it (and gave it a standing ovation), but I felt like vomiting.

*Stomp*, according to *Playbill*, is "a celebration of rhythm". There is no dialogue whatsoever in the show, nor any actual music—just rhythm. The cast spends the entire show drumming on unusual objects. They use every part of their body to make noise with trash cans, umbrellas, and—mostly—the stage floor itself. As an audience member, I felt like a teacher in a room full of hyperactive kids.



Whatever was around, the cast had to drum on it, and everyone competed to see who could be the loudest. All their actions were

miked, so the pounding thumped through the auditorium at full volume. The show turned me off in about two minutes, and my opinion only went down from there. I may have found *Evita* boring, but this was insufferable. I'd have left at intermission; unfortunately, there was no intermission. The good thing was that it was a relatively short show, so in about an hour and a half my ears could start to get back to normal. I could go on for pages about how dreadful it all was, but frankly I think it's an experience that is best forgotten. **[Stomp is without question my least favorite show ever. I'd rather have a root canal than suffer through it again—seriously.]**

After the show I made my way to the Civic Center trolley stop. Virtually everyone there had come from the show, and every one of them (except for me) was headed northward to those suburbs I described earlier. I avoided the crush and decided to explore a different part of San Diego by catching the next train south.

I found out fairly quickly that there were basically three San Diegos—four if you count the tiny downtown. After downtown I left the lily white northern area behind. South of downtown is an old industrial area, mixed in with apartment buildings and run-down bungalows that seem to house only black people. That extends for a couple of miles. South of there is the “Pacific Fleet” trolley stop, adjacent to the San Diego Naval Yard. The independent cities of National City and Chula Vista are further south. National City is mostly black, while Chula Vista is mostly Hispanic; but both come across as gritty poverty-stricken places.

South of Chula Vista we again entered the city of San Diego, which technically extends all the way to the Mexican border. This area was really weird. It comes across as a bunch of small towns—each about a mile apart, with nothing but wasteland (basically swamp **[though it's likely dry at other times of year]**) between them. Each little town has its trolley stop, serving a few ratty mobile homes and shacks and maybe a warehouse or a minimall.

Finally the trolley makes it to San Ysidro (ee-SEED-row), the southwestern extremity of California. Technically part of the city of San Diego, you could think of San Ysidro either as the southernmost and largest of those little towns with nothing in between them or as the northernmost neighborhood of Tijuana, the Mexican metropolis that sprawls over the hills to the south.



**San Ysidro U.S. Customs facility (note trolley at left) – San Diego, California**

The trolley goes all the way to the Mexican border. It literally ends right at the border, maybe a yard away from the green plastic wall that divides the U.S. and Mexico. There's a bumper block at the end of the trolley track that keeps it from crashing its way into Mexico. A McDonalds restaurant serves as the trolley station, and right next door is the enormous U.S. Customs building that extends over Interstate 5. People who want to enter Mexico **[on foot]** walk upstairs to a skywalk and walk over the customs building and the interstate. In the middle of the skywalk there's supposedly a turnstile that literally marks the border. Shortly beyond there are the Mexican customs facilities.

I didn't go into Mexico. Having seen the interior and the Yucatan, I didn't feel the need to explore a border town. Instead I had a great time exploring San Ysidro. San Ysidro is definitely not on anyone's tourist map. Its dealings with tourists mostly amount to selling Mexican car insurance, changing money, and providing a slew of cheap motels where drunk people can crash after a night on the town in Tijuana. They also have an outlet mall, but many of its stores are empty. Most of San Ysidro exists for and is run by recent immigrants **[many of whom do are not legally in the U.S.A.]**. It's one of the few places in America where the signs are **only** in Spanish and where Spanish is all you hear on the street. It really is a foreign country that doesn't require going through customs.

I walked up and down the two main streets of San Ysidro, Vía de San Ysidro and San Ysidro Blvd.—which are two different streets. Then I crossed I-5 where I snapped that same picture of cars backed up at the border that you always see in newspapers. (Actually, things seemed to be flowing fairly well today—only a minor delay in each direction.) I also snapped a few shots of Tijuana,

which is a dumpy third world city that just happens to abut the U.S. border. I snapped a shot through the border fence looking into Mexico (not that there's anything to see—and there wouldn't be the other way either), and then I just wandered around a bit.

My ultimate destination was the scene of another tragedy, though one that most people have forgotten. On July 18, 1984, a man named James Huberty committed mass homicide in a McDonalds in San Ysidro. Twenty-one people died, including five small children. This was the first in a string of mass killings in public places that would plague our country through the '80s and '90s, and—happening as it did just after I entered adulthood—it really left a mark in my memory. McDonalds had little choice but to take down the golden arches from that location after the shooting. They moved about half a mile south to their new site right at the border. The old McDonalds was donated to the city, and today a fake adobe building the exact size and shape of a fast food outlet serves as a library and community center (“Biblioteca de San Ysidro”). There's a small memorial to those who were killed by a tree out in front. It's weird to think that the kids who were playing in the McDonaldland that day would be well into their twenties today. This is one of those places where you can ponder what might have been if one small detail in history had been altered.

**[I found in researching this revision that I actually didn't make it to the massacre site. The former McDonalds is about four blocks west of the library and is actually now the site of a branch of the local community college. There is in fact a plaque by a tree in front of the library, but I didn't actually read it. I assume it probably commemorates a donor or something similar. The monument to the murder is an elaborate modern sculpture, the sort of thing you'd expect on a college campus. One of the few reasons I might consider returning to San Diego would be to actually complete this pilgrimage. Another error in the previous paragraph is that McDonalds didn't move to the site by the border. That location was already there in 1984. In fact, when the incident occurred, police were told there was gunfire at “the San Ysidro McDonalds” and mistakenly responded to the border location before realizing the shootings were actually west of Interstate 5. The replacement McDonalds is a just a block west of the murder site, and presumably many of its customers today are students at Southwestern Community College.]**

South of the murder site, San Ysidro Blvd. is lined with stores selling goods of questionable origin at rock-bottom prices. As I suspected I might, I had acquired enough junk on this trip to outgrow the wheeled backpack I had brought. I happened to see a display of similar bags outside one of these shops. One was a small wheeled bag in yellow, with black highlights. Since those are Garrigan's colors, that seemed the bag for me. At \$10, I could hardly complain about the price—even though it was obviously not well made. (The better-quality one I brought with me cost \$28 at K-Mart.) This was a cash only transaction, with no taxes added—adding all the more suspicion to the origin of the goods. It was clearly a new bag, though, and empty luggage isn't the sort of thing people steal. I slapped down a \$10 bill, and the mustachioed entrepreneur slapped a sticker on the bag to indicate it was paid for.

Further inspection of the bag makes me wonder even more about its source. Everything sold in legitimate stores in America has to be labeled with its country of origin—though in our global economy there can be some major fudging with what “made in” means. I was expecting this to be made in China, like pretty much everything cheap. My next guesses would be Honduras and Bangladesh. In fact, though I searched the bag inside and out and even looked for stamping on the plastic handle and wheels, there was no indication anywhere of where it might have been made. I'll have to assume the pleasant señor assembled it himself, right there in San Ysidro.

**[That bag lasted only a few months. The following summer I taught a day class at Iowa Lakes and frequently walked out to the college's Algona center, towing the rolling bag behind me. By the end of the summer the wheels had literally disintegrated, to the point that they no longer functioned. I probably did get \$10 of value out of the bag, but not much more than that.]**

I made my way back to the McDonalds at the border. There was a long line, so I didn't buy anything. I did take advantage of their restroom, however. I'm glad my need was for—as they say--#1, because this was one of the most disgusting restrooms I've ever been in. The walls were covered with graffiti, and the stool was covered with feces. McDonalds normally prides itself on clean restrooms, but definitely not here. If the bigwigs from Chicago came here on an inspection, I'd think they'd lose their franchise.

I took the trolley north a few stops to Palomar Boulevard, which is in one of those little villages between the border and San Diego proper. I hadn't eaten a thing since that cheese and cracker tray on the train, and by now I was very hungry. There was a Del Taco stand in a minimall here, so that became my dinner destination. I had a combo meal featuring a cheese quesadilla (redundant, if you know the origin of “quesadilla” in Spanish), two tacos, and a drink for \$2.49—not a bad deal.

A northbound trolley was just leaving as I walked out of Del Taco, so I had a long wait at the station. This was not a very pleasant wait. Two scruffy black men were going among the waiting passengers begging, getting quite hostile when people refused to give them anything. I pretended to be deeply engrossed in some very dull newspaper articles and tried hard not to ignore them when they came up to me. The swore at me, but that was it.

There were also people accosting me for money on the trolley itself. A very drunk old white man came through the cars begging for change, and a middle aged black man went around with one of those fundraiser boxes of candy bars—though he made no mention of what exactly he was raising money for. I declined both of their requests, but they did provide some entertainment on an otherwise dull ride back downtown. **[Entertaining as they may have been, they did nothing to raise my overall very negative opinion of San Diego. I have been to “bad” neighborhoods in many other cities without incident, but in San Diego I seemed to have to watch myself even in good areas. It's definitely not a place I have a burning desire to return to.]**

I had a schedule for the Surfliner with me, and I knew trains left San Diego hourly until 6:30. After that the next train left at 9pm, getting to L.A. around midnight. It was about a quarter to six when I left Palomar, and it grew perilously close to that 6:30 departure time as we reached downtown. My watch showed 6:28 when we pulled into American Plaza, which is across the street from

the Santa Fe depot that Amtrak uses. The old depot is supposed to be an architectural treasure, but I couldn't tell you one way or the other. I barreled through the lobby and out to the platform without taking time to look at anything but signs. I boarded the train and had just taken a seat when the whistle blew and we were off.

This was a **very** full train. Apparently lots of people from Los Angeles and Orange County take weekend trips to Tijuana **[or perhaps to San Diego—though I can't imagine what they do there]**, and they all return on the Sunday evening train. When I got into this car there was exactly one unoccupied seat in the entire car—and I nabbed it. Things gradually emptied out as we traveled north; by the time we got into L.A. the train was probably about one-third full.

In the seat next to me was a pleasant, but virtually silent boy of middle school age. He lived with his mother in Irvine and had been in San Diego for the weekend to see his dad. Other than that about all I found out was that the Irvine public schools had two weeks of spring break coming up at the end of March and that school got out for summer on June 24 (one month to the day later than Garrigan lets out—but then we didn't have a two-week spring break). **[I definitely feel two weeks of spring break is excessive, but a couple days to break things up might be nice. I've always thought, too, that it would be nice to go to school year-round but have every weekend be a long weekend. I think the kids would do better academically with that set-up.]** Mostly the kid either played a video game or stared off into space (sometimes both at once) the whole trip.

The most interesting passengers in the car were about three rows in front of me and across the aisle. In the window seat was a blond man in his early twenties who apparently taught high school social studies at a high school in Lincoln Heights, an inner city area quite near the winery I was at yesterday. Beside him was a very tanned college-age kid with bleached hair whose parents were apparently letting him spend a year off school doing nothing but surfing. I suppose that's right up there with all those people who "found themselves" trekking through Europe and Asia a generation ago. The surfer was asking questions about what it was like to be a teacher, and the "professional" gave some surprising answers. "They've got a set curriculum," he said, "but you can pretty much do what you want. Nobody ever checks up on teachers." I got the feeling from some of his other comments that he probably was a pretty good teacher, but I'm sure that's **not** a comment he makes to his principal at evaluation time. There is, however, some truth to his statement; and I'm sure it's even more true in the enormous schools they have in big cities. **[There are many states that attempt to prescribe a curriculum, and the federal government is moving in that direction. It's pretty much impossible to make schools "one size fits all", though, because every student and every teacher are different. The best schools allow teachers to use their strengths to get across to all types of kids.]**

For much of the trip north it was pitch black outside the train. With Camp Pendleton on one side and the ocean on the other, there was absolutely nothing to give off light on a cloudy night. In Orange County I started seeing dots of lights in the housing developments, and by the time we got to Los Angeles County, security lights at the factories lit the way into town. Nevertheless, it was a pretty dull trip overall.

I was still a little hungry when we got to Union Station. I remembered seeing some fast food places along the gold line yesterday, so I boarded a train and went back toward Pasadena. Unfortunately, by the time I got out to where the fast food was, it was after 10:00 and most of the stuff was closed up. Eventually I spotted a Subway that was open near the Fillmore stop in South Pasadena. I left the northbound train, went in, ordered a ham and cheese sandwich, ate it, and went back to the platform. Almost immediately the exact same train I had been on returned southbound. I boarded it and went back toward Union Station. **[I do distinctly remember this side-trip, which was one of the dumbest wastes of time I've ever done. If I really wanted food, I'd have done better to head to any of the stops in Hollywood. I'd have arrived there sooner and found a wider variety of food. I'm not sure if I remembered seeing something specific in Pasadena that I wanted to go to or if I just wanted to spend some time riding the brand new train line. Either way it was a pretty silly thing to do late at night.]**

Across the aisle from me was an old Hispanic man who seemed very confused about where he was going. The entire car was full of Hispanic people, so who did he ask for directions—me. The man told me he wanted to get to 4<sup>th</sup> Street, where he would catch a bus. There is no stop anywhere on the L.A. metro called 4<sup>th</sup> Street, but I knew that the Pershing Square station on the red line downtown was at 4<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. What didn't add up, though, was where he was taking the bus to. His ultimate destination was Hawaiian Gardens, a tiny suburb far to the south about halfway between Long Beach and Anaheim. While spilling his entire life story he told me (in rather broken English) that he worked as a janitor at a bingo parlor there. While I've never actually checked the map, I can't imagine any bus originating downtown that would go to Hawaiian Gardens. If such a bus does exist (and it could—the bus routes in L.A. are weird), the trip would probably take two hours, even late at night. Logic tells me that to get to Hawaiian Gardens you'd most likely take the green line to its terminal in Norwalk and then take a bus straight south from there. The man was insistent that 4<sup>th</sup> Street was what he wanted, though. I further clarified that it was 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Los Angeles he meant, not 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Long Beach (which I know exists) or 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Norwalk (which easily could). He assured me "4<sup>th</sup> Street—downtown L.A.," and that was where I directed him. Since I also had to transfer to the red line, I even walked him through the transfer and directed him exactly when to get off. If he went upstairs, he'd have made it to 4<sup>th</sup> Street. I only hope he eventually made it to work.

**[I'm always a little bit worried when people do ask me for directions, since I've read that this can be a front for pickpockets and the like. I've never had anything of that sort happen to me, though (though I have seen it attempted—in Madrid, Chicago, and New Orleans), and I always try to be helpful to other people. Largely from being picked on as a kid, I learned that exude confidence when I walk—even when I don't really feel it. I think that's a great asset when I travel, but it's probably also what makes people pick me when they want directions.]**

I left the man at Pershing Square and continued west a few more stops. It amazed me that even late at night the metro was very busy. Everybody had a seat, but pretty much every seat was full—and this was a full-length train. **[The buses are not nearly so busy late at night—particularly on Sunday.]**

It was right at 11:00 when I got back to the Comfort Inn, so I watched the evening news. The big local story was a scandal they'd had in the recent primary election for mayor. While the same two candidates would apparently have won regardless of what shenanigans went on, there was a big fuss over people who had not marked their ballots properly. L.A. apparently uses optical scan ballots, but—unlike what we do in Iowa—they have the names on one sheet and then fill out circles on another sheet, just like a kids do when they take standardized tests. The ballots they showed on TV looked exactly like the Scantron test sheets Margaret uses in Cresco. That alone would be enough to screw up a lot of votes, but that was not the issue. What was being debated was what to do if someone definitely marked a circle, but didn't mark it full or dark enough for the machine to register. The commissioner of elections had representatives of all the different campaigns inspect the ballots and use a blue marker to complete the circle for ballots with this problem. The blue ballots were then counted by hand and added to the totals. That seemed a pretty fair solution to me, but of course the losing candidates were filing suit saying it was unjust. (Never mind that their representatives were among those deciding which circles were filled in to begin with.)

I'm writing this May 18, and one of the big news stories today was the general election for mayor of Los Angeles. I notice the two candidates were precisely those who won the primary, so I guess the law suits must not have gone anywhere. Interestingly these two men—Hahn and Villaraigosa—are the same two who were running for mayor when I first visited L.A. Hahn won then, but Villaraigosa won today. He'll be the first Hispanic to lead the city since California was a state.

The other big story in tonight's news was the latest scare to come out of Homeland Security, the possibility that helicopters could be used as part of a terrorist plot. Frankly, I wish our government would quit wasting their time and money making us worry about things that are beyond our control. Of course it's good to keep our guard up, but it's silly to be constantly crying wolf. You just can't go through life being scared all the time. **[This, like pretty much every scare, failed to materialize. Even those that have come to pass have caused minimal results for all the brouhaha the government makes about them. We make a big deal out of the 9/11 attacks, yet the 3,000+ people who died there are really only a tiny blip in the overall deaths in our country. Far more people are killed from traditional forms of murder in any given year than died in the World Trade Center attacks—not to mention that more than twice as many died in the needless wars we got into as a result of that attack.]**

I sort of shrugged at our President's latest warning and faded off to sleep.

## **Monday, March 14**

I was intending to sleep in this morning. I set the alarm for 8:00 and planned a leisurely morning. Needless to say I was up and dressed before 7:00. I packed up my stuff, but left it in the room—deciding to use this extra time for a bit of exploring. I took the metro down to Wilshire/Vermont and transferred to the other branch of the red line, which I took to Wilshire/Normandie. (I don't know why Normandie Avenue isn't spelled like the French coast.) Though not downtown, this is essentially a neighborhood of skyscrapers. **[With the stupid spelling it has, I'd picture it as a suburban cul de sac, rather than a rather gritty midtown strip.]** Nearby are the regional offices of many Asian banks and several insurance companies. The ground floors are full of shops and restaurants. I walked into a Burger King, where a very pleasant counter girl seemed surprised to see me. (In fact, I was the only customer in the place.) I enjoyed a croissant and coffee and then set out again.

I walked about half a mile west to Wilshire and Western. Almost all the buildings around here are in art deco style. The focal point is the Wiltern Theatre (Wiltern as in Wilshire and Western), a green concrete palace that today is used mostly for stand-up comedy shows. Perhaps the most amusing building is new construction—a Denny's that was built with an art deco façade to match its neighbors.

The neighborhood subway station is also designed to blend into the neighborhood. This is one of the few that has an above ground station house, which is done in art deco style. Even the elevator is art deco; it looks like the pictures you see of the elevators at the Empire State Building.

I returned to the Comfort Inn, got my stuff (now in the two wheeled bags), and checked out quickly. I wheeled the bags to the Vermont/Beverly plaza and decided I'd be wise to take the elevator instead of the series of escalators. **[Something that is nice about recently designed transit systems is that everything is handicap accessible—which also makes them nice for people with luggage.]** I soon caught a downtown train and had an uneventful ride to Metro Center.

To transfer from the red line to the blue line I just rode up one short escalator. A train was waiting on the platform, but it looked fairly crowded. I walked down the platform to the very first car, which was relatively empty. I was able to sit in a row by the door, which gave me a place to balance my bags without taking up an extra seat.

A little further forward in the car was a young Mexican mother, together with her son (slightly bigger than a toddler) and the son's grandma. The son had a toy gun that made electronic machine gun noises whenever he pulled the trigger—which he did constantly. As if on cue to obey their stereotypes, the Mexican women praised the obnoxious brat with comments like "Qué precioso" (essentially "how adorable"—in the way only a grandmother can find her grandson adorable). I've never really cared one way or the other about kids having guns for toys, but I couldn't help but wonder just how wise it was for a little kid in a gang-filled neighborhood to have a toy gun.

The blue line route was looking fairly familiar on this, my third trip to L.A. I did notice one major change, though. A landmark gospel church along the way used to proclaim the message "una voz que clama en el desierto" (a voice that cries out in the

wilderness) in mammoth letters painted on its side. That sign is gone now. Today the side of the church (which is basically a glorified warehouse) says "Jesucristo: Fuente de Sanidad" (Jesus Christ: fountain/source of health). They obviously haven't changed their teachings, but it was interesting to see they'd repainted the sign.

I went south to Rosa Parks station and decided that again it would be wiser to take the elevator than to walk as I transferred from the blue line to the green. Also waiting for the elevator was an elderly British couple who were traveling with the luggage you'd expect an elderly British couple to carry (just one step down from steamer trunks). The three of us were the only white faces among an all-black crowd on the platform.

The elevator was somewhat less than pleasant. Much of the floor was covered with a sticky, greasy substance much like Vaseline. Somehow the three tourists and five large black women, plus our luggage and the local women's shopping bags managed to wedge into a very small elevator without much of anything touching the disgusting ooze.

**[This experience in L.A. contrasts with my experiences on the San Diego trolley. While the people here may have all been minorities, they were just people going about their business, rather than beggars accosting people in a train station. The elevator may not have been pleasant, but we were all in it together, and we all got upstairs without incident.]**

Once we got upstairs almost immediately a green line train arrived on the platform. Again it was full, but I raced for the very front door and managed to get the sideways-facing seat that is normally reserved for handicapped people. If a disabled person had actually boarded, of course I would have let them sit there. None did, and I was grateful to have a place for me and my bags.

I got off the train at Aviation, together with the British couple and almost everyone else on the train. Everyone except me headed straight for the busway. The Brits obviously planned to take the "G" shuttle I'd come in on, while everyone else was transferring to various buses that would take them around southwest L.A. I was also transferring to such a bus, but I knew from checking the routes and schedules in advance that my bus didn't stop in the busway. I was boarding a "Big Blue Bus" operated by the City of Santa Monica. Some of these do stop at Aviation station (indeed, when Margaret and I were waiting for an MTA bus to take us to Redondo Beach, we saw bus after bus after bus from that company). My particular line (#3, I think) didn't, though. It did, however, stop just steps away from the station, at the corner of Imperial and Aviation. I felt like an idiot dragging my bags out to the street as everyone else headed to the busway, and I felt even sillier when the "G" shuttle passed me with the Brits on board. I walked with the same confidence I always do, though, and made my way to the "BBB" stop.

My metro day pass didn't work on the big blue bus. **[With the new electronic fare media, they've changed that and have an integrated regional fare system.]** I had to pay a separate fare, though the 75¢ charge would hardly break me. The bus traveled north on Aviation for about half a mile, then west to the LAX parking lots. There's an enormous bus transfer in the middle of the parking lots, and we stopped for quite a while there. Then we made our way north on Sepulveda Avenue to Manchester Boulevard, where I got off.

Westchester, the area north of LAX, is a pleasant neighborhood of offices and hotels, with pleasant homes on the side streets. It's not unlike the area around O'Hare. There are also a lot of doctors offices in this area, most featuring obscure specialties. I suppose it would be convenient for someone who is flying in for treatment to have their specialist near the airport.

The bus I would be transferring to started its route just two blocks west of Sepulveda on Manchester. I could see the bus parked there, but it didn't move for nearly ten minutes, when it was scheduled to leave. Seconds later it stopped at Sepulveda, and I got on board. I made my way about a mile and a half east on Manchester, watching the neighborhood gradually deteriorate from new and pleasant to tacky and grimy. I got off at La Cienga Avenue, just short of the San Diego Freeway. Had I crossed the freeway, the neighborhood would have decayed even more. As I saw how seedy things rapidly became, I was pleased that I chose to come here from the west rather than the east.

This bus ride was part of a quest to find an L.A. institution: Randy's Donuts. If you've watched TV or seen a movie in the past fifty years, there's a good chance that at some point you've seen Randy's Donuts. The landmark pastry shop (which apparently is now on the National Register of Historic Places) would look like any other fast food place from the '50s were it not for the gigantic fiberglass doughnut affixed to its roof. I'd seen pictures of Randy's Donuts when I was a kid, and I always thought the place was kind of cool. Even if it was in a gritty neighborhood that had long ago seen its better days, I was going to see it.



**Randy's Donuts – Inglewood, California**

I went crazy and bought out the place. I bought a chocolate covered doughnut, an apple fritter, and a travel mug full of coffee. **[While I've bought several others over the years, I must say plastic travel mugs are almost never a good buy. The lids get**

**loose and leak with time, and the coffee always ends up tasting like plastic.]** I also bought a baseball shirt with a picture of Randy's Donuts on the front **[which I still have and wear from time to time]**. The attendant, who obviously doesn't see a lot of walk-up business, seemed surprised that an actual tourist made the trek here (though the place is mentioned in almost every tourist guide). He was perfectly happy to take my money, though, and I was glad to have the souvenirs. I doubt I'll ever be back to Randy's Donuts **[though I just might—it is kind of fun]**, but I'm glad to have made it there. (... And, by the way, the doughnuts were good—but nothing particularly special.)

The westbound bus stop was right in front of Randy's Donuts. A scruffy college-age man who was buried in a book was sitting on the bench, so I leaned on the adjacent trash can. The next building to the west is a veterinary clinic that I hope was closed, since a homeless man was camped out in their entrance.

A bus came fairly soon, and I made my way back west. I pulled the cord when I saw the IHOP on the corner of Manchester and Sepulveda, and it surprised me when the driver turned the corner and stopped facing south. Apparently this line splits, not unlike that line I had taken in St. Paul. Every few buses head down to the airport instead of going further west on Manchester. Had I known that ahead of time, I would have just stayed on board and gone down to the airport. Since I pulled the cord, though, I figured I really should get off. **[As I mentioned in St. Paul, this is what I hate about buses. On a train you know exactly where you're going; buses change routes and often have split terminals that can be extremely unclear to novice riders.]**

I waited about fifteen minutes for another big blue bus, paid another 75¢, and headed back to the mixmaster in the airport parking lot. There I caught the "B" shuttle, which took me to the terminals. There was an **long** line outside Terminal 1; in fact it spread almost all the way to Terminal 2. I don't know what the problem was, but I was thankful that no one was waiting outside my terminal.

Since I now had two bags, I had to check one of them. I'd never checked bags under the new security system, and it was interesting to see the process. I waited in a fast moving line that took me to the self check-in kiosks. One of the questions the machine asked was if I had bags to check. When I selected "yes", it asked me how many. I selected "1", and it printed my boarding pass and directed me to a nearby counter. An attendant there affixed a barcoded "MCW" collar to the bag and directed me to another short line. Here a very bored attendant rattled off a number of questions about things that might be in the bag that the bomb detector could damage. I honestly said "no" to all of them, and he put the bag on a conveyor belt that led to the bomb machine. I never saw the bag again until I got to Mason City. When I claimed it, a hologram was attached to the barcode collar that said "PASSED – LAX".

I made my way to a third line, which was the security checkpoint leading to the gates. An overly happy black woman in a low-cut blouse was checking identification at the bottom of the escalator there. She greeted me with a cheery "Isn't a nice day to be in L.A.?"—a strange greeting to give someone who is leaving the city. I agreed that it was a nice day, and she said "yes it is, isn't it" as she passed my passport back to me.

The line for security was backed up to the bottom of the escalator, but it moved right along. Several crew people arrived as I was waiting in line. The cheery woman made a cursory glance at their credentials and lifted the latch on a tape maze that was blocking off the steps beside the escalator. The crew went up the steps and straight to security.

While LAX is an enormous airport, each individual terminal is quite small. Terminal 2 has just thirteen gates, and it offered exactly two opportunities for me to have lunch. One was the most overpriced Burger King I have ever seen. Their value meals were \$7 and up, and desserts that cost \$1 in Iowa were \$2.95 here. **[Prices have definitely gone up in the past five years. Today seven bucks would hardly get a second glance at Burger King. Even the cheapest value meals are \$6 these days.]** The other choice was the Wolfgang Puck Café. Wolfgang Puck is the chef at Spago, a pricey Beverly Hills restaurant where the stars go to be seen. He's probably never set foot in this airport café, but the Hispanic men who man the grills here presumably follow his recipes. **[I'd bet he rarely sets foot at Spago either, and it's probably Hispanic men who cook the meals there as well.]** The Wolfgang Puck Café was offering a lunch special for \$9, just slightly more than lunch at Burger King would have cost. The special included a miniature California pizza (a fluffy crust covered with a very flavorful sauce and a variety of interesting cheeses) and an outstanding salad of mixed greens, raspberries, and candied walnuts. It was really an excellent meal—and definitely closer to being worth \$9 than Burger King would have been to being worth \$7. **[There's a Wolfgang Puck Café at the Minneapolis airport now, too. There are so many other good choices for food at MSP, though, that I've never checked it out.]**

I didn't order anything to drink. I still had one of the two-liter bottles of Mexican pop **[which in 2005 I could take through security]**, and I put that (together with the wine) in the bag I'd gotten in San Diego. I sipped from the bottle as I waited for my flight. That was both better and cheaper than either buying something at the airport.

I had brought my tests from the college with me and hadn't even begun to grade them. I had plenty of time to kill at the airport, and I spent most of it grading Statistics tests. **[I just gave the equivalent of that same test tonight—March 10, 2011—as I write this revision.]** I also entertained myself by watching people board flights to destinations I don't normally think of—like Yuma, Guadalajara, and Kuala Lumpur.

Eventually they started the boarding procedures for my flight. The woman at the gate began by offering "pre-boarding for our Sky Team elite members". I wouldn't even have noticed that, except that when the woman at security looked at my identification, she circled a place on the boarding pass that said "SKY TEAM – WORLD PERKS – SILVER ELITE". World Perks is Northwest's frequent flyer program. I'm not a frequent flyer, but to buy tickets online, you have to be in the program. "Silver Elite" basically means you've flown more than once on Northwest. (The levels go up to platinum, and silver is just one step up from what the Boy Scouts would call "tenderfoot".) I thought for a minute and proceeded decided I might as well proceed to the gate. After all, the worst that would happen is they'd tell me to wait. The woman waved me through the jetway without a comment, so I was among the first to board. That let me

find a convenient place for my carry-on and entertain myself by watching everyone else board the plane. I had the exact same seat I'd had flying out, so I probably was on the plane fifteen minutes earlier than I would have been otherwise.

The plane was entirely full. In the row with me were two women who were entirely silent during the entire flight. When the stewardess asked them if they wanted drinks, they just grunted. The woman in the window seat just stared out the window for three hours, while the woman in the middle put her head in her hands as if she were ill.

A passenger across the aisle from me asked the stewardess for a pillow. She noted that Northwest no longer supplies pillows to coach passengers, and that opened up an interesting discussion about the company's financial problems. The passenger, like me, found it hard to believe that the airline could be losing money when virtually every seat on every flight was full. The flight attendant, who noted that she had just taken a pay cut to remain employed, said the real problem is the ridiculous discounts the airlines offer on tickets. They fill the seats (it's how they convinced me to make this trip), but they don't charge enough to cover the costs. There's probably something to her comment. I know I paid less for this flight than I did when I flew to New Mexico to visit my brother a decade ago. That's less money for a greater distance. At the moment you can fly from Mason City to almost any destination in America for not much more than \$200. When you consider that some of those connections involve three different flights, there's not much being allocated to any one flight.

I graded papers most of the way to Minneapolis. We had a long approach to the cities, waiting about 45 minutes after they turned on the seat belt sign before we actually landed. Still we made it to the gate right on time. I had a "dinner" of breadsticks and marinara sauce at a Godfather's in the airport and made my way to concourse A.

About an hour before departure the woman at the gate announced that the flight was likely oversold and she would need at least four volunteers to give up their seats. She offered two compensation options. The first was a ridiculous scenario. They'd put the volunteers on a flight to Des Moines and give them \$50 for further transportation (presumably taking the bus up to Mason City—though you'd first have to taxi to the bus station). The other was to be put up in a hotel overnight and placed on a morning flight to Mason City/Ft. Dodge, with compensation of either \$200 cash or a voucher for a return ticket to anywhere in the United States that Northwest flies. (What did I say every ticket out of Mason City cost?) A blind man and his companion from Ft. Dodge were the first to volunteer. They first clarified that they could fly to Alaska on the free tickets. **[Interestingly, Alaska is pretty consistently considered "domestic" by the airlines. Hawaii is always "international", though, as is Puerto Rico. I suppose it's the relative popularity of the destinations that determines that.]** The woman said yes and then proceeded to go through all the fine print very carefully with them. Basically you have to book early if you want to use the free tickets. Only one-third of the seats on any airplane qualify for them, and once those seats are full, you can't book the freebies. Aside from that, the restrictions are really pretty minimal. If I didn't have to work tomorrow, I'd have volunteered myself. The woman called a supervisor to approve the compensation and issued the vouchers to the men.

Before long the flight crew arrived. The flight attendant looked at the manifest and noted that this particular flight was always overbooked. Four was apparently a small number of extras compared to some nights.

They found their volunteers, and the rest of us boarded. The flight to Mason City was uneventful, and all but two of us got off the plane there. There are no jetways in Mason City, and facing the cold night was the first reminder I had that I was back in the Midwest. I ran out to the parking lot, started my car, and let it run while I waited for my checked bag—which was the very last one to be unloaded to baggage claim.

It was after 11:00 when I left the airport, and I was glad I had booked a room at the nearby Microtel in Clear Lake. I was dead tired and definitely wouldn't have wanted to drive back home. I checked into the motel and took my stuff up to my room. I didn't even turn on the TV though. Before I knew it I was asleep.

## **Tuesday, March 15**

The Microtel offered a very nice breakfast, which I enjoyed. I bought gas at the new Texaco station next door and then headed back to Algona. Today was a school day. I taught all day at school and then in my night class at the college. I was even more tired by the time I finally got home, but it was worth it. This was a very fun little getaway.