

TENNESSEE TRASH #36

A Zine by Gary R. Robe for Mailing Number 216 of the
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Mexico (twice), Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Two Green Belt Tests, A Convention, A Birthday, and Other Ways to Spend My Summer Vacation...

I barely made it back from SOB Con before departing on a two-week junket of Mexico and Central America. I got to shorten the trip by a few days by not attending the ANIQ meeting this year. I would have liked to attend the meeting not only because I get to do a lot of networking there; it is also the only opportunity I get each year to hear other examples of public speaking in Spanish. That is really helpful to me when I have to get in front of an audience. Anyhow, management nixed my attendance using cost cutting as the reason.

Corlis didn't object very strenuously to me shortening the trip to two weeks. There is nothing much to say about the Mexican part of the trip. I arrived, called on customers in Mexico City and Monterrey, and spent the nights in the hotel. I didn't even get to explore the city on Saturday because I started to get sick on Friday evening and spent Saturday in bed trying to recover.

On Sunday as I was packing to leave for Costa Rica a strange thing happened. I started the day by working out in the hotel gym. One nice thing about martial arts training is that you don't need anything more than an open space to practice. As I returned to my room to pack, I noticed that flashing blobs of color obscured part of my field of vision. It was like I had just stared into a bright light and then was dazzled by the afterglow. This however, didn't fade away,

and I also got a pounding headache. After 45 minutes of this, the flashing colors faded away, but about a third of my field of vision was a blind spot. By the time I got to the airport the symptoms had disappeared. I described this to my doctor when I returned home, and he said that this was an ocular migraine, and that it was not serious unless it starts happening regularly. This was not a comforting thing to happen while I was 2,000 miles away from home.

I always look forward to visiting Costa Rica. It is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen, and the pace of work there is never very hectic. I was travelling with Carlos Gamboa from Mexico and his boss, Eduard Tora. It was their first time to visit Costa Rica, so I got to be the local expert for once! We spent two days making only three customer visits interspersed with some sight seeing and buying of souvenirs. I already had plenty of Costa Rican crafts at home, so I only bought four kilos of coffee to take back to my coffeeaholic friends back home. What I really wanted to buy was a Costa Rican soccer shirt, but there was not one to be found.

We had a 6:30 a.m. flight the next morning to El Salvador, so we begged off having a big dinner on Tuesday night. This was my first visit to El Salvador, and I was not sure what to expect. There is not much flat space in El Salvador, so the airport is located right on the beach. It is a 40-mile trip then into the city of San Salvador, so I'm sure the taxi drivers love the setup. The skyline of San Salvador is dominated by the cone of a huge, looming extinct (I hope!) Volcán de San Salvador. Our hotel was located right at the foot of the

mountain. There must be a road right to the top because there was a small forest of radio towers up there. The city would be missing a bet not to open it up to tourists. I certainly would have paid for a chance at the vista from that point.

Since the resolution of El Salvador's civil war ten years ago, the country has been busy in encouraging investment and industry. As a result, there are many large modern manufacturing operations there. The country itself offers almost no resources other than cheap labor, land, and easy access to ocean transportation. Whether they can create enough jobs quickly enough to raise the standard of living remains to be seen. The travel briefing I got from Corporate Security before leaving on the trip said that street crime and kidnappings were common in El Salvador.

We had to get up early again the next day to go on to Guatemala. Jorge Urrutia, the manager of our local distributor, met us at the airport. As we began to talk with Jorge, we discovered that there had been a bad breakdown in communication. For some reason Jorge thought that I was the Eastman expert in food additives! He had set up appointments for the wrong industries. The upshot was that I had to stay an extra day in Guatemala because Jorge had to get meetings set up with the coatings customers.

Guatemala City was another surprise. I had expected a decrepit place with ugly buildings and crumbling infrastructure. Instead, Guatemala City is attractive, has good roads, and a lot of pride in what they have accomplished since achieving political stability. I had also not realized how far back the history of Guatemala reaches.

On our first night there, Jorge took us to Antigua Guatemala, the original Spanish colonial capital of the Central American Vicerogency. This was one of the first Spanish cities built on the continent. La Antigua was mostly destroyed many years ago when the wall of a volcanic crater lake burst and sent a flash flood down on the city. After that happened they decided to move the capital to safer ground and founded the present-day Guatemala City. Antigua

remains as a tourist attraction and archeological dig to study the colonial period.

Our first stop in Antigua was a convent now converted into a hotel. One of the first things you notice upon entering is the date on the cornerstone: 1547! This massive building was finished and working just 55 years after Columbus' first landing at Santo Domingo. It is difficult to imagine that the Spanish could have established themselves in this remote spot and raised a city in so short a time, yet here is the proof. The hotel has some whimsical touches. For example, the altar of the chapel has been converted into the reception desk of the hotel. The guest rooms also offer a great deal of privacy. The walls are all nearly 3 feet thick! This was where President Clinton stayed last year when he attended the OAS meeting. I wonder how close his room was to Fidel Castro's.

After a few drinks at the hotel, we ventured out into the cobblestoned streets of the city. Jorge pointed out that the knockers (What knockers! Oh sank you doktor!) on the huge doors of the houses were all placed almost 8 feet off the ground. They were conveniently located for riders on horseback. We ended up at a restaurant on the central plaza of the city where we tried out a traditional Guatemalan dish, the Chapin. This is a tasty combination of steak, black beans, rice, guacamole, and fried bananas. As we walked back to the car we could see the dim glow from the crater of El Volcán de Fuego reflected in the clouds.

The area around Guatemala City is very seismically active, almost like Yellowstone. The next day Jorge pointed out steam vents puffing away along the side of a lake, and a large geothermal electrical generator. I half expected to feel an earthquake at any moment with all this volcanic activity, but the ground stayed still while I was there.

I had another very early start on my trip back home on June 3. The only flight from Guatemala to Atlanta leaves at 7 a.m. I took the usual airline admonition to arrive two hours before the international flight at their word, and had to wait for the Delta counter to open at about 5:30. All told this was an enjoyable trip, and I wouldn't mind an

opportunity to see more of Guatemala and El Salvador in the future. I did, however, pick up a hitchhiker.

Six days after I got back home, my bowels let loose, and I still have not completely recovered. I've seen three different doctors and have been put on a whole range of treatments, but about every four days, my whole system turns foul again. I've become adept at providing stool samples, but nothing has ever turned up in the tests. I've got to go in to a gastrologist next month for a full exam from stem-to-stern that I hope turns something up.

As soon as I started back to Tae-Kwan-Do classes after my trip, my teacher decided that I was ready for the green belt test. Since the green belt marks the halfway point to black belt, they throw in some extra goodies. For the green belt test you have to pass little challenges like breaking a concrete block with your fist, escaping from rear bear-hug hold, and fighting two people at once. I made the mistake of practicing the breaking of the cinder block the day before the test.

I bought the practice blocks at Lowes, and managed to break two of them. The next day, however, my hand was so badly damaged that I could not break the block during the test. My teacher, however, accepted the evidence of the broken blocks and let me pass with the promise that I would try again when I test for the next level. I had made it even worse on myself by getting the blocks at Lowes. They use a much finer-grained concrete than the building supply store that my teacher uses. I had broken blocks that were much stronger than I was expected to do in the test.

The most universally dreaded part of the green belt test is the two-on-one sparring. For three minutes you get only a mouth guard, shin pads, boxing gloves, and a groin protector (thank you very much). Your opponents get full protective equipment. I had to fight a 280-lb. guy we affectionately call Mt. Everett around the school, and Rob Herron, a tough army captain. I didn't come off too badly. A couple of times Everett tried to take me down by tripping me, but I managed to dance around his legs. He went

down, but I didn't. I got to take the opportunity of having Everett down on the mat to go in and whale away on Robb solo while Everett was picking himself back up.

A couple of weeks later I took another green belt test for Hapkido style fighting. I actually like Hapkido better than Tae-Kwan-Do because it is close-range combat that focuses on escapes from holds. It is more like Judo in that it involves twisting an opponent's limbs into uncomfortable positions or throwing them to the mat. I can now say that I am a double green belt in Tae-Kwan-Do and Hapkido.

I can see an instant difference with my fellow students at the school now that I have made green. Before I was almost ignored by the blue and red belts, and now they have started being much friendlier. I can see their point. Below green belt you are not really committed to the art, and 80% of the drop-outs happen below green belt level. Once past green, however, you are truly on the path to black belt. I can't imagine stopping now, barring injuries, from not eventually making black. It will probably take two more years to do it, but I have confidence that I can make it now. Despite my running battle with the yellow squirts, I've noticed a big improvement in my physical condition in the last month. I can now get through a three-minute round of sparring and be ready to go again with five minutes rest. I've also lost a lot of the fat around my face and neck, although the beer-belly is still mostly intact.

Midwestcon was a nice break between trips. Since I was on business travel on Memorial Day, I got to designate Midwestcon Friday as comp time. We arrived in mid-afternoon and promptly took up our place beside the pool. It was a shame that the consuite was not poolside, but at least the hotel had put most of the group in rooms near the consuite. We soon discovered that poolside was a fine place to stay because it was more comfortable than the consuite and eventually most of the people we wanted to see came past the pool. The boys were able to swim until they were ready to sprout gills.

On Friday night there were only the Charlotte in '04 and Frank and Millie's Xerps party. I

hung out in the Charlotte party chatting with Dan Caldwell for most of the night with occasional runs back to the consuite for beer refills. We had an impromptu Harry Potter panel discussion in the consuite at about 1 a.m. when I started to talk to Carol Brown about the T-shirts I had made for the boys. It turned out that essentially everyone in the consuite at that moment were also Potter fans, and we spent most of an hour discussing plot details and anticipating the imminent release of Potter Vol. 4.

On Saturday afternoon we headed downtown to the Union Station to turn the kids loose in the Children's Science Museum. They have completely changed the museum since our last visit and we only managed to drag the kids away at closing time by telling them that the gift shop was closing soon.

On Saturday night there were more parties, most noticeably the Boston in '04 and the continuation of the Charlotte in '04 parties. Naomi was once again the provider of many sweets and tasties. Unfortunately my gripe was acting up and I didn't get to sample as much as I would have liked. The boys had been anticipating room parties most of the day. By the time they made it to the Boston party, however, they were wilting. After trying valiantly to stay up, they asked to go to bed at about 11.

We all slept until 9 the next morning, and the boys immediately went back into the pool. I had not been aware of the hotel's strict 11:00 check out policy. They started charging for an extra day if you were not out by 11. I discovered this by overhearing someone else griping about it at 10:45. I checked out of the room, but then took my time in moving out. It really bites when a hotel gets all bent out of shape over check outs. There will always be plenty of people who have to leave early to keep the housekeepers busy. Some hotels seem to think that just having people out of the room will somehow magically make them ready to rent again instantly.

The next weekend was Independence Day and my birthday. Our plan was to take off as soon as I got off work on Friday. It turned out that we got an early start because my diarrhea had gotten so bad that I had to go in

to the company clinic for re-hydration. Once they pumped me full of fluid again, they sent me home. I felt lousy, but we got to Bowling Green by nightfall.

My father has established a new pond stocked with bluegills and catfish. I don't know that I would classify what we did as fishing exactly. To me, fishing is preparing the tackle, baiting the hook, casting into the water, and waiting, perhaps to catch a fish eventually. In Dad's pond, you can eliminate the waiting part and the uncertainty of catching something. All four of the grandkids went on the expedition. My brother tried to use his stopwatch to time how long it took to get a bite. He couldn't push the stop button fast enough.

We started fishing near the bank to try and catch bluegill, but most of them were too small. We then went for catfish in the deeper water. There's nothing quite like the squeal of delight of a seven-year-old with a three pound catfish on the hook. All the time we were out Isaac kept saying how much he liked to eat bluegill and catfish, but when faced with the reality back at the house he wouldn't touch it. Nick actually stayed with dad during the cleaning process, and was very interested in the dissection process. He would take the next victim from the bucket and hold it up and tell it about its fate. He also opted for macaroni and cheese at dinnertime.

My birthday wishes were relatively simple. A cake, homemade ice cream, and movies on DVD. I simply don't get a year older without the homemade ice cream. The family was not thrilled when I blew out all 45 candles knowing that I was suffering from an obscure Guatemalan version of Montezuma's revenge. Tradition, however, is tradition and if they insist on putting 44 plus one to grow on candles on my cake, I must oblige by blowing them out myself.

Most of my energy at work over the past two months has gone into preparation for the Pan-American Coatings Exposition 2000 being held in Mexico City on July 19-21. Although this involved a mercifully short one-week trip, it was a very full week. First, we have a batch of new products being

introduced this year, and I needed to visit the key customers in the region to introduce the new stuff. Plus, I had committed to presenting a paper on VOC reduction techniques during the technical seminar. Finally there was the show itself where Eastman would have the highest tech booth we had ever attempted. In addition to the usual stacks of product literature and freebies, we would have computers hooked up to two 40-inch plasma screens. One of these would be linked up to a live internet connection so that we could demonstrate the company's E-commerce capabilities. The other would be a looping presentation with little blurbs about the key products

I already had presentations prepared for most of the seven topics that were selected for the display. I had to edit them down to a maximum of 10 slides for each, and then stitch the presentations together.¹ I then had to get commentary from the rest of the team as to whether we had the right content and to check my spelling. I then had to translate one other presentation that came from another division into Spanish. Once that was done, I had to assemble the whole shebang into a single presentation that could run as a continuous loop.

¹ *Sidebar to anyone in SFPA that might have some influence at Microsoft.* PowerPoint needs a feature to link different presentations together in a screen show. There is a nice feature for kiosk-style presentations that allows a presentation to loop indefinitely. In my case, however, I had eight separate presentations I needed to put together plus a transition slide. I ended up having to start with a blank template and then go into the slide master for each presentation, copy the background as a grouped graphic, and then pasting the background onto the blank slide. I then had to go and copy the content from the individual slides and paste them into the blank slide and fight against PowerPoint's tendency to re-format fonts and re-size things. I had to do this for about 80 slides. It would have been so much easier if there was a way to call up the individual presentations and then jump between linked files. I tried to write a macro to do this, but I could not find a way to make a macro auto-execute in slide show mode without some input from the keyboard. In this case, the PC running the show was in a locked closet, and we were too busy to mess with the PC to switch between shows. This is just an idea if is looking for something to discuss at a *Windows 2000* design team meeting.

I also had to prepare introductory presentations for the new products for the key customers we were going to visit before the show started. To add extra excitement to the proceedings one of the two Mexican sales reps who were responsible for planning the week on their end quit on July 1st. At the same time it was announced that our lab supervisor, Keith Moody was being promoted to be VP of Research at the Lawter Division in Wisconsin. Guillermo Perdomo, the guy I replaced when I transferred into this job three years ago is our new supervisor. This is good for me since Guillermo is obviously interested in promoting Latin American, and I can now use him as a language consultant.

I arrived in Mexico on the night of July 16th. Carlos had left me a message at the reception desk of the Nikko Hotel that he would call with instructions for the morning, but he never called. Guillermo called me at 7 a.m. to ask what the plan was, but I didn't have a clue. When 9:00 rolled past with no sign of Carlos, we called the office. It turned out that Carlos was there but in a meeting until 11:00. He called later to explain that most of the appointments had fallen through. Of the six calls we had on the agenda for the week, only two actually happened. At least this gave me plenty of time to go over the presentations again with Guillermo and to discuss what he and I plan for the lab once he takes over.

The cancelled appointments also gave me a chance to practice my speech. We didn't have customer meeting on Tuesday afternoon, so we went to the office and I gave my presentation to Carlos and Guillermo. This was a really good thing to do because there were some places where I had things wrong, and others where what I was saying was perfectly clear to me, but not them. I was also worried about the length of the talk with 47 slides to cover in 50-55 minutes. The rehearsal ran about 80 minutes, and with all the interruptions, and back-tracking to make points more clearly, I was confident that the talk would time out just about right.

The next morning we headed for the World Trade Center. My presentation was the second one of the day, so I had time to copy

my presentation over to the computer hooked to the projector and make sure that everything worked before I went on. My presentation was very well received. I knew there was significant interest in my topic when the room filled up. There were only about 30 people for the first presentation but about 75 for mine. There was no podium, so I used the laptop on the head table as a teleprompter. That made it much easier to make contact with the audience. The speech ran 55 minutes, and I handled the questions afterwards with no trouble.

After my presentation was over, we then had to handle the booth setup. This was a much more complicated booth than we had used before, and we had hired a crew to do the complicated setup. We did, however, need to hook up the computers and get them working, and then move in the boxes of literature and freebees. As I suspected, getting the computers to work with the big monitors was not exactly plug-and-play. As big as those things were, they were really low resolution, so I had to set the PC's back to 640 x 480 to get the entire picture on the screen. Getting the scrolling PowerPoint presentation working was no big deal, but the other system needed an Internet connection. The WTC sent a technician to modify the networking properties so that we could connect with the Center's server. That took several tries to get right, and I had to know how to reverse the changes so that the PC would talk to the Eastman server again once the show was over.

We at least got to get a good night of sleep before the start of the show at 1 p.m. on Thursday. Guillermo and I took a taxi to the World Trade Center at noon. I brilliantly cleaned out the minibar in my room of all its bottled water and Gatorade so that I had plenty to drink for the day without having to rely on the water on-site.

There were several hundred people waiting at the gate when they opened the exposition at 1 o'clock, so we immediately became busy. We had a steady flow of people through the booth, and the seven hours of open time seemed to pass quickly. The display that I had worked so hard on was very successful. Since our booth was right at the entrance to

the show, it was a natural place for people to stop and wait for others to arrive. Many of these people stood and watched the show since it was the only marginally interesting thing that was visible in the waiting area. Several of those people came over to the booth to find out more about what was on the screen.

Even with the late start that morning we managed to put in a good nine hours of work between setting up the stand in the morning and closing it down in the evening. I was not helped by the fact that my guts had started to act up again. I had not been in bed long when I had to run for the bathroom at 1:15 a.m. That is when the earthquake hit. Let me tell you that the 32nd floor of a 45-story building is not a really comforting place to be when a Richter 5.9 earthquake happens. Being stuck on the toilet at the time doesn't improve things.

Having been through an even stronger quake in Costa Rica last year, I could tell quickly that this one was nothing to worry about (riiiight!). The movement of this one was quite different from the earlier one. It started with the familiar side-to-side shaking, but this was followed a few seconds later by up-and-down shaking. The response of the tall building was also a bit creepy. The earthquake itself only lasted for 20 seconds, but the building kept oscillating for over a minute after the shaking stopped.

Friday was the last day of the show, but it was a long haul. The gates opened at 11 o'clock, and stayed open until 8. I remembered to take a dose of Tylenol before leaving the hotel that morning, and brought more with me. The day started out slowly, and there was not a big rush when they opened the gates. The traffic, however, increased steadily through the day and by closing time we had run out of contact sheets and we had to write people's requests on the backs of their business cards. Once the show closed, all we had to do was remove the leftover literature and freebees and reclaim the computers. Within 45 minutes of closing, the booth was disassembled and we were out of there! We had a quiet dinner in the French restaurant of the Nikko that night and then went our separate ways the next morning.