

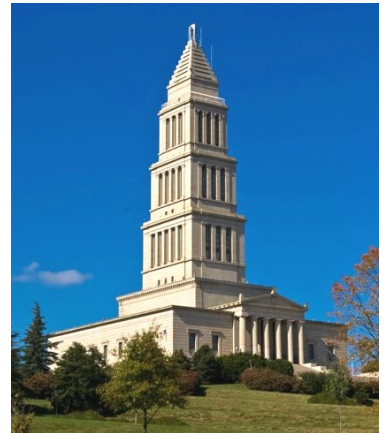
Dear Friends,

I am back from two weeks in De Souf, the first in Alexandria, Virginia, and the second in North Carolina. I can tell you now from experience that it is very hot in Dixie in August.



I went to Alexandria for the 24th International Congress of Vexillology, which is what flag-scholars call their subject (from the Latin *vexillum*, meaning originally not exactly a flag, but a cloth standard carried on a pole – at left is a reconstruction of the *vexillum* of a Roman legion). We met at the George Washington Masonic Memorial (right), a curious building devoted mostly to a museum of freemasonry. I had visited this museum years before, and found it interesting in its way, with elevators that went diagonally up the tower and *tableaux* of the history and ideology of freemasonry on ascending floors. There was an exhibit on the Emerald Table of Hermes, and much similar esoteric stuff.

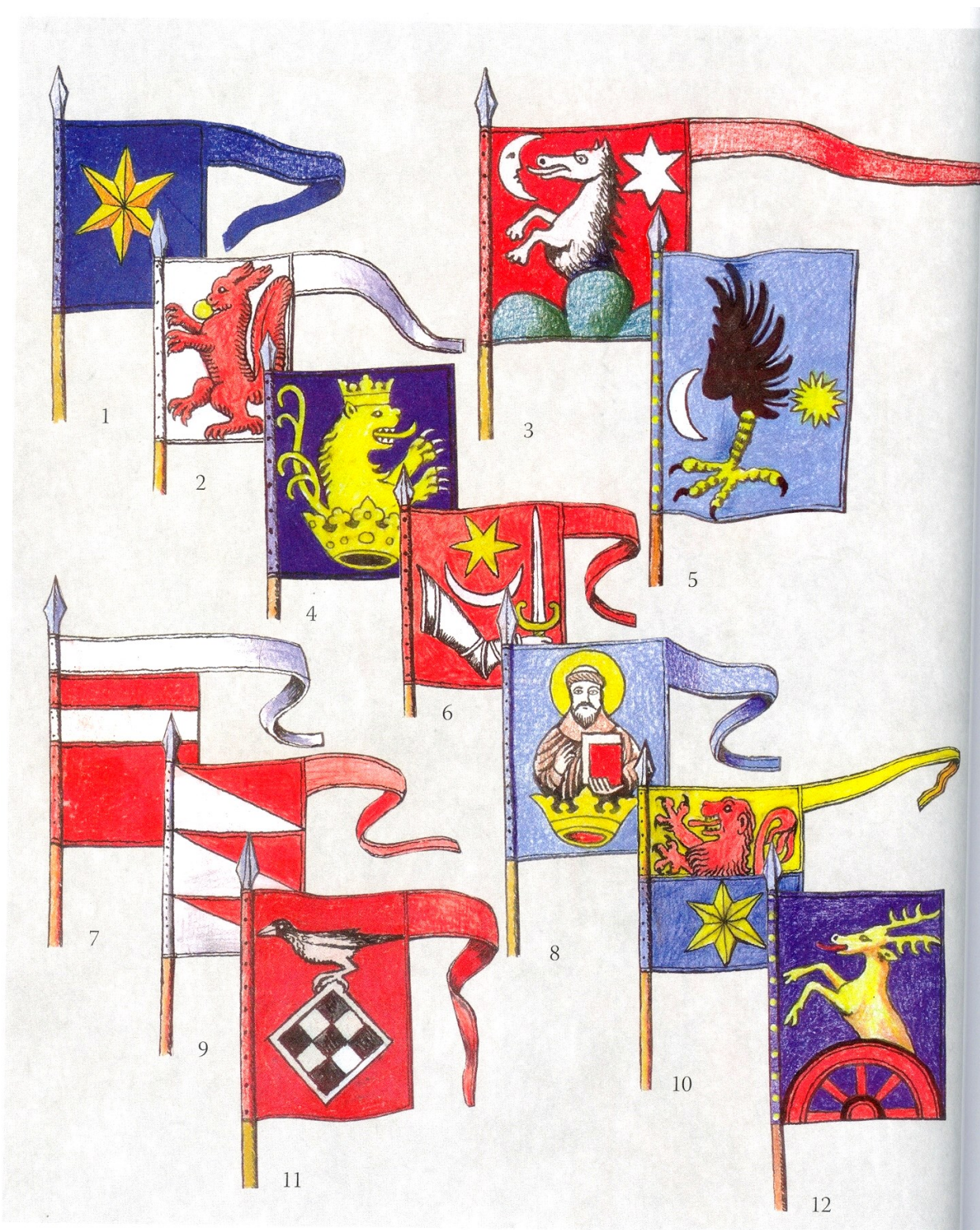
The Masonic Memorial works better as a weird museum than as a conference venue, though – it is at the top of a hill, the diagonal elevators were not operating (maybe they needed a secret Masonic password), the only men's room was down a long flight of stairs and then down another set of stairs which led only to more stairs going up. More than one of the conferees felt a little faint before it was over. The many severe portraits of Washington in Masonic costume did not help much.



It was a standard-issue scholarly convention, four days of sessions where learned papers were delivered, separated by schmoozing and buying from tables. The 37 slide talks included presentations on the flags and symbols of Gibraltar, the historical connection between the East India Company flag and the American flag, the development in America of the Czech national flag, and my favorite: “Four Forgotten Norwegian Ensigns.” The forgotten ensigns looked much like the present Norwegian Customs flag, shown at left, but with different words in the center panel. These topics may not be of general interest, but they were catnip to us. I cruised the tables and bought beautiful flag books in English, French, Czech and Hungarian. I can't read Czech or Hungarian, but I can look at the pictures. I show a sample from the Hungarian book on the next page.

I had a day off on Wednesday, when the conventioners went on a special flag-centered tour of the Smithsonian Museums. The sessions themselves gave me all the flag lore I





### LOVAGKOR, 14–15. SZÁZAD

Zászlósúri rangokat viselő főúri családok zászlói Hunyadi Mátyás király (1458–1490) idején: 1 Szentgyörgyi. 2 Tárczai. 3 Szapolyai. 4 Geréb. 5 Kanizsai. 6 Kinizsi. 7 Újlaki. 8 Pálóczi. 9 Báthori. 10 Vitéz. 11 Csopor. 12 Erdődi





could handle in one week, and anyway I have learned never to take mass tours of anything if I can help it, and certainly not of museums. So I spent Wednesday by myself in my favorite Washington museum, a fine Greek Revival building



begun in 1836 as the Patent Office and now occupied jointly by the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of American Art. There was a superb exhibition of paintings by George Ault (left: “Bright Light at Russell’s Corners” (1946)), and some stunning folk art from the permanent collection, and fabulous Art Deco bronzes by Paul Manship, and of course portraits of distinguished Americans from the 17th century up through yesterday (right: Irving Berlin (1925) by Miguel Covarrubias). I enjoyed it so much I went back and spent most of Sunday there too. The museum has a brilliantly arranged study collection where works not on full-dress exhibition are displayed on three floors of high cabinets, and also a conservation department where the conservators work in plain view behind glass walls, and come out from time to time to answer questions. Terrific! This museum is always my first stop in Washington and I am never disappointed.

Washington was hot and steamy the whole week I was there. I expected this, but living in San Francisco a person forgets what humid mid-90s day after day really *feels* like. It was awful – I was more or less confined to indoor spaces. Every so often it would rain, not from a storm but because the air was so saturated it wept. Alexandria was beautiful, full of old wood and brick buildings from federal times, but the heat kept me from exploring more than I could see from an air-conditioned taxi. I did eat dozens of clams on the half shell, tasting refreshingly of Eastern salt water, and even some soft-shelled crabs, unobtainable outside the Mid-Atlantic sea-coast and usually out of season even there.

After the conference ended I stayed for two more days, to see my law school classmate Andy Schwartzman and go to some more Washington museums. We tried to visit the house on the grounds of the Soldiers’ Home where Lincoln spent summers during the war. But the tours were all sold out – imagine that! I did get to the National Building Museum, though, to see an exhibition about the Art Deco muralist Hildreth Meière, best known now for



the amazing Nebraska State Capitol and for Rockefeller Center in New York (above: “Dance” (1932) from Radio City). No matter how impressive the building and its decoration, though, I didn’t want to visit the U. S. Capitol (or its flashy new Visitor Center) during the week of the disgusting Congressional Dance of Debt. It would only have encouraged them. “Put not your trust in princes, in whom there is no help.” Psalm 146:3.

On Monday, August 8, I left Washington for North Carolina to try to finish the remaining 20 of its 100 counties. I wanted to take the train to Raleigh, but Amtrak cancelled the train, and the buses were impractical, so I had no choice but to fly. My first car, a Chevrolet, was so loud it felt like driving an airplane, so I went back and exchanged it for a Hyundai that just murmured softly in Korean. The Motel 6 in Raleigh was comfortable enough when I finally got there. It would have been more fun if I were interested in drugs or prostitution, often the wine of the country at Motel 6 because it is the cheapest national chain. But it had wi-fi, which worked really fast because no one else was using it. While others were fornicating or shooting up, I stayed in my room and watched Charlie Rose on my new laptop. Some people just don’t know how to live.

The next day I began my tour of eastern North Carolina, or at least started toward it from Raleigh, which is in the central piedmont. Unlike Alexandria and Washington, more of a steamer, in North Carolina the heat burned like an oven. Iron railings were too hot to touch, and so was the seat of my car (and the steering wheel) when I returned to it after a while. Usually I get a folding camp chair on these trips, to sit outside and dig the scene. In North Carolina in August I didn’t even bother – there was nowhere to sit that would not have been punishment. I wouldn’t have gone at all in August, but I couldn’t help when the conference was held – they always set these events for the summer so academics can attend.



For the first 75 miles or so out of Raleigh I stayed on the freeway, but then pulled off onto a side road and headed to “historic” Halifax. It was historic mostly for the Halifax Resolves, which in April 1776 authorized the North Carolina delegation to the Continental Congress to vote for independence, the first delegation to be so instructed. Halifax was a considerable town in the mid-18th century, but when President Washington visited in 1791 he noted that it “seem[ed] to be in a decline.” Things haven’t got much better since – although Halifax is a county seat, with an imposing Roman Revival courthouse, it no longer even has a place to have lunch. A few houses survive from the glory days, frame or brick with antique proportions (taller relative to base than later buildings), and some were open for tours at fixed inconvenient times. They didn’t look very interesting from the outside, though, or worth enduring the crippling heat to explore.

So I continued through the North Carolina countryside in my air-conditioned car, staying on small roads whenever I could. There was cotton growing everywhere, and vegetable crops I didn’t recognize (beans, maybe?), and even a little floppy-leaved tobacco. Fields

were neat and regular, verges were closely cropped; the few buildings sagging into paint-flaking ruin did so within almost visible boundaries. For long stretches the road went straight through deep forests of pine and poplar and hickory (right) – North Carolina is one of the most heavily forested states in the nation. I could see how fields had been cut from the forests; past their corners the trees resumed, not in regular rows like planted orchards but with the unruly tangle of the Wild Woods. Hawks



glided overhead while what looked like a muskrat (*Onychia zibethicus*) crossed the road *almost* beneath the wheels of my car. I have since checked and I'm sure that's what it was – muskrats (left) inhabit the wetlands of eastern North Carolina, and the land where I saw it was very wet. But I could not hear birdsong, or wind in the leaves, or the babbling of nearby freshets, because my windows were closed and the air conditioning was running, as needed to sustain life.

I stopped for the night in Murfreesboro. The room, in the only motel in town, was air conditioned but full of flies. The rate was \$40 even, cash only please, with no wi-fi but also no charge for the flies. Better flies than bedbugs or fleas! Drugs and prostitution would not have been a problem here either, if I'd wished to order in. The owner, a Patel

દિવસના ચોઘડિયાં						
રવિ	સોમ	મંગળ	બુધ	ગુરુ	શુક્ર	શનિ
ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ	શુભ	ચલ	કાળ
ચલ	કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ	શુભ
લાભ	શુભ	ચલ	કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ
અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ	શુભ	ચલ	કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ
કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ	શુભ	ચલ
શુભ	ચલ	કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ
રોગ	લાભ	શુભ	ચલ	કાળ	ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત
ઉદ્ભેગ	અમૃત	રોગ	લાભ	શુભ	ચલ	કાળ

from Gujarat, was a fellow Ganesh-*bhakta*; on learning this he gave me a Hindu religious calendar for telling the good days from the bad ones. I suggested that *all* days were good days, and he agreed, but pointed out that *some* good days were better than others. The calendar (left) distinguishes good days from bad by color, but it is in Gujarati, and would be more useful to me if I could read it, and knew whether yellow meant good or bad. I couldn't get Charlie Rose on my laptop because there was no wi-fi, but did go to the next town (Ahoskie) to see *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. I recommend it – the computer-generated apes were laid digitally over real performances by human actors, which yielded astonishingly convincing and affecting results. And there was wi-fi at McDonald's!





The next day I made a detour to cross the sapphire-blue Meherrin River on an unscheduled cable ferry, the first of many free ferries I took in North Carolina. The cable (on the left in the picture) guides the ferry so it doesn't go floating off. The ferryman,

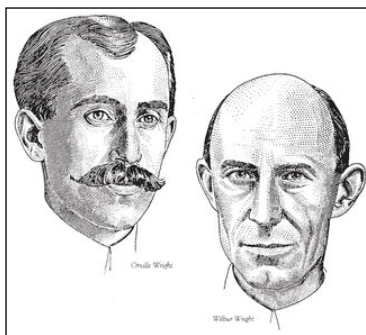


blissed out like Siddhartha in Hesse's novel, did not mind at all that once across I turned around and came right back again. I stayed a while on the bank, watching the light filtering through the trees and bouncing back from the water.

After that I finally made it into the first of the new counties. GATES, CHOWAN, PERQUIMANS, PASQUOTANK (great name for a county!), CAMDEN, CURRITUCK, DARE. In Dare County I was on the Outer Banks. It is supposedly a place of

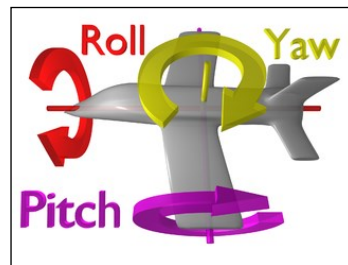
great natural beauty, but I couldn't see much beauty from the road – to me it looked like Cape Cod on steroids. Every so often I would catch a glimpse of dunes or beach grass.

But of the two roads that ran down the center of the main island, one was a tawdry and overbuilt commercial strip, and the other ran between tightly packed rows of beach houses. The beach houses of the Outer Banks are very ambitious, running sometimes to five stories (right). They eclipsed what I might have seen of the banks themselves from the road, and it was far too hot to get off the road and walk on the beach. I would have fried like an egg.



One place I wanted to visit on the Outer Banks was Kitty Hawk, the site of the Wright Brothers' first powered flight. There is nothing left of the original site – indeed the site itself, including the hill from which they flew their gliders, has shifted with the dunes. But there is a visitor center, and reconstructions of their rough living quarters, and photographs, and excerpts from their letters and journals, and a clear explanation of how they did it and

the three-axis control (roll, pitch and yaw, see diagram) they needed for controlled flight. It was thrilling to see the field where they made their first four flights, all on the same day (December 17, 1903). The first three went 120, 175 and 200 feet, hardly enough to matter. But the fourth one went 852



feet, and that settled it. In the picture below, the starting point is at the boulder and the four smaller monuments mark the length of the flights. Actually seeing this before my eyes helped me understand what really happened that day.



I thought more about it that night, as I ate another few dozen raw clams. I found a place that served soft-shelled crabs, too, but they insisted on breading them and frying them until they tasted like nothing but batter. The owner was firm that this was the only way these crabs could be prepared, which was not even close to true.

I was staying on Roanoke Island, just west of the long barrier island where Kitty Hawk was. Roanoke is of course the site of the famous Lost Colony, established by Walter Raleigh in 1584 as the first English colony in the New



World. Left: a miniature of Raleigh, painted by Nicholas Hilliard in 1585. One of the leaders of the colony returned to England in 1588 for more supplies, and when he came back the colony had vanished – what happened to it is one of the smaller great questions of American



history. Right: the family of Virginia Dare, the first European child born in the New World, after whom the county is named. Nothing remains of the settlement now but some earthworks, but there is an elaborate visitor center which includes an elegantly paneled Tudor room that William Randolph Hearst pillaged from England and then sort of forgot about, and which a Congressman later insisted should go into the visitor center to mislead generations of visitors about what life was like in the Lost Colony.

I had dinner at Captain George's, one of many seafood buffets in town and the scene of much noisy and uninhibited *fressing*. You don't know what noise is until you have heard a couple of hundred Americans let loose with a promise of unlimited food. I confined myself to the steamed clams – they didn't have raw clams except at the bar, where they



also had televisions going at top volume. But I kept going back for more steamers – as they are served in the shells you can’t get more than about a dozen on a plate at once.

The next day I continued down the Outer Banks to the end of Hatteras Island, past the Cape – more summer houses, more beach grass, more clams – and crossed Hatteras Inlet on another of the state’s ferries to Ocracoke Island two miles away, under the clouds of what used to be called a mackerel sky. HYDE County! There were cormorants preening on the buoys, and gulls overhead, not your pale California seagulls but smaller black-headed laughing gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla*). I knew them from their raucous cries, and their chattering to each other that seemed almost like language. We passed a small encampment flying the Jolly Roger – they were probably not real pirates, because the Coast Guard would have busted them, but it was nice to see people showing an independent spirit. Then I turned around and sailed back, and retraced my path 71 miles back to Roanoke. More clams! In the presence of raw clams I too become a laughing gull. *Eek! Eek! Ke-rawk!*



After two nights at the Duke of Dare Motel on Roanoke I set out to the west, away from the coast but still on the coastal plain. The North Carolina coastal plain is completely flat, much flatter than Iowa. Much of this land was “reclaimed” from drained swamps – the word *Newland* appears often in place and road names. Lots of trees (below left), many completely clad in ivy, and where they have been cleared, lots of agriculture. In the very typical scene below right, it is corn on one side of the road, cotton on the other.

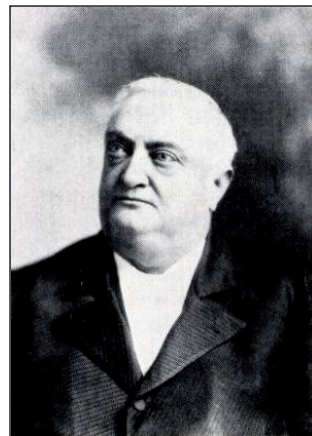


I had hoped to see the Great Dismal Swamp in Pasquotank and Camden Counties – the name has long intrigued me – but when I got there the swamp was on fire. The roads were closed, and aromatic smoke filled the air from miles away. But on the way out of Roanoke I got a look at a similar swamp at the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in TYRRELL County, conveniently situated next to the Dare County Bombing Range.





Although not quite as great (or probably as dismal) as the one a few counties north, it was definitely a swamp. But unlike the opulent swamps of Louisiana, all I



could see from the road was a flat expanse of bog. Signs said WATCH FOR BEARS NEXT 15 MILES, so I did, but didn't see any; RED WOLF CROSSING NEXT 10 MILES, they also said, but none crossed where I was. I'd like to blame the heat for my not seeing any wildlife in the refuge, but the truth is that even if it had been a cool crisp day in October, I doubt I would have gone bounding along the Alligator River in hiking boots, looking for bears. WASHINGTON, BEAUFORT, and then across the broad brown Pamlico River on the ferryboat *Governor Daniel Russell*. Above left: the boat; above right: the governor, who served from 1897 to 1901. What a cutie pie! The river smells like brackish salt water, which it is – actually it smells like clams.



Into CRAVEN County, with a stop at New Bern, North Carolina's colonial and first state capital, founded in 1710 by immigrants from Bern, Switzerland, led by Baron Christoph de Graffenried. The city uses the arms of Swiss Bern, which have a bear on them (a pun, or canting charge: *Baer* is German for *bear*). There are bears all over New Bern. The one below left is mounted on the outside wall of the Town Hall; the other two I found on the street. The middle bear's T-shirt reads NBHS 07 STATE CHAMPS. The right-hand bear is made of the American, North Carolina, and Bernese flags.



After Craven came CARTERET, then a stop for the night at Beaufort. Perhaps a bit clammed out, I went for a steak instead. In the South you have to order iced tea *unsweet*

if you don't want it full of sugar – *sweet tea* is the default setting. Of course I *did* want it full of sugar, but let my superego win this one small battle. This is the only use I have ever heard for the word *unsweet*. Back on the road the next day, I checked off new counties a little out of the planned sequence. PAMLICO, then across the Neuse River on the ferry *Floyd J. Lipton*, sailing with the ambitiously leathered Christian Motorcyclists Association (“Riding for the Son”); JONES, ONSLOW, PENDER, NEW HANOVER.

In New Hanover County, just outside Wilmington, the World War II battleship *U.S.S. North Carolina* lies moored in the Cape Fear River, looking just like the plastic models I used to make as a boy. I went on board and toured the ship, nine levels from engine room to flag cabin (for visiting admirals; lucky crew members slept there when it was not in use) to bridge. It was grim and functional, but its bare functionality gave it beauty also. It was not air conditioned. But if it's hot now, I thought, how hot must it have been in the engine room in the Solomon Islands, when the engines were going full steam and there was perhaps a fire somewhere caused by enemy action? (The *North Carolina* earned fifteen battle stars.) The ship's company must have appreciated the ice cream machine; there was also an “electric cow” that dispensed milk for cereal and coffee. Here's an official navy picture showing the *North Carolina* as it looked during the war.



That was the last tourist spot on my agenda, and I started back to Raleigh. The further west I got, toward the piedmont, the more I saw slight rises in the land, the suggestion of a roll in the horizon, a novelty after so long on the dead-flat coastal plain. Two more new counties (BRUNSWICK, BLADEN) and one more cable ferry (back across the Cape Fear River) and North Carolina was *finished* – state number 28 done! Which will be the next to fall before my irresistible advance? Ohio? Michigan? Mississippi? North Dakota? Oklahoma? Minnesota? All are now within easy reach.

At Raleigh, the capital, I visited the depressingly modern Legislative Building, and looked in at the State History Museum, but my heart wasn't in it. I was tired, getting cranky from the heat, and had had all the Tarheel Tourism I could hold. I just wanted to get home. I ate a last Dixie lunch at a Waffle House, a 24-hour southern chain of peculiar



charm, and had a valedictory bowl of grits. Grits are delicious with butter and sugar (even *ersatz* sugar). Why can't a person get grits anywhere but the South?

Finally my plane took off, and I could see from the air how the roads and farms were cut into the forests as into a carpet. I understood those forests much better now than I had before the trip. As a kind of *lagniappe* I changed planes in Detroit, allowing me to add WAYNE County, Michigan, to my list (now at 2206 counties, 70.41%, 927 counties to go, but who's counting?). Detroit is the last major city in the United States I have never been to – the airport hardly counts, being only the first of five levels of city-visiting. (Don't get me started on this – one *mishegos* is probably enough for readers of these letters.) I was glad I went (although not so glad to have gone in August), and even gladder to be on my way home. When I heard the captain say it was 55 degrees in San Francisco, I had to wonder why I had ever left.

August 2011



“Cosmic Energy” (1928), by Hildreth Meiere, at the Nebraska State Capitol

