

Fear and loathing

in Greenwich

A descent into the decline of the American Empire

Sports editor Frank MacEachern and film critic Mark Farmer took a fact-finding expedition to New York City for spring break. The following is an unedited account of their travels. And remember: every word is true.

Day One: Monday Feb. 21

8:30 am Food's running low. We're losing hope — had to kill Frank so we could eat him. No, no, no, that's not true. There were problems getting out of Dartmouth, but nothing that bad.

R.E.M.'s on the stereo, there's a festive mood in the Jetta, and I can't help but feel optimistic. The quaint farming communities of Nova Scotia and their equally quaint roadkills roll on by. We're on a mission to the heart of the American dream and the decay of the American Empire. It's just Frank, Pam, Jillian and me. Already I feel a delicious anticipation at the prospect of being a foreigner in a strange and twisted land.

11:13 am We pass into a miasma of mud, bad roads and construction. Learn from sign that it is called "New Brunswick." This will undoubtedly be a long four hours to the border.

12:54 pm No idea where we are. Hank Williams is crooning on the stereo. We pull into a truck stop and learn we are in Sussex, N.B. None of the decor inside has been changed since Hank Williams was a toddler. I find it vaguely disturbing that there are paintings of what must surely be 200-foot-tall cows on the walls, judging by the backgrounds. A homage to Paul Bunyan's ox? A homage to Chernobyl fallout? Who knows. We finish our coffees and move on.

1:39 pm Reach Saint John, absolutely the butt-ugliest city I've ever seen. And it stinks (apologies to all Saint Johnians). The skeleton of a burned-out hospital leans at us from beside the highway. Learn that it is squatting territory for the homeless.

3:15 pm America! Calais to be specific. And again there's a bad

smell.... Very disturbing. A vague disquiet settles upon me. Six generations of fear of American annexation, invasion and domination rise to the surface. I wanna go home.

Am shocked at the ragged state of the famed American Interstate Highway system until I realize we're on a connector road. Frank is becoming enraged at the profusion of potholes.

"These goddamn people must've voted wrong for ten generations!" he screams, knuckles clenched over the wheel.

8:15 pm Am desperately trying to convince Frank to drive straight through to New York. No dice — the entire eastern seaboard must be encased in fog by now. The Clash is played on the stereo.

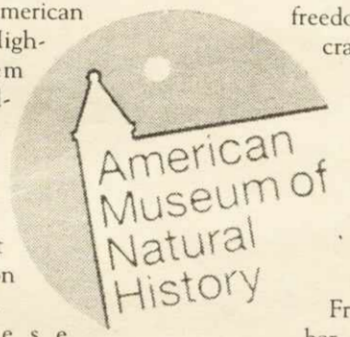
Interstate 95 would be better called "the way of shameless capital-

ist exploitation." Every five miles is a Burger King, a McDonald's and a yogurt place ready to suck in unwary travellers. If you want to sample a cross-section of American society, these are the places to do it. Somewhere in the American constitution there must be a guarantee of the freedom to saturate the market with crappy junk food palaces.

10:15 pm Stop near Boston at Roy Rogers restaurant, the poor, mutant cousin of KFC. Complete greasestef.

11:15 pm Encounter Irish step dancers at a Boston pub. Frank's friend Scotty is tending bar, and we crash at his place. On the way Scotty describes a characteristic of large American cities: segregation. Blacks live in their own neighbourhoods, Latinos in theirs, whites in theirs, etc., etc.

There's an unwritten code that whites don't sell their homes to Blacks, Scotty says. If they do, "white flight" ensues. Maybe I shouldn't moralize, considering the race problems Canada has, but I suddenly realize the last time I saw blacks and whites mixing freely was Amherst.



Dazed and confused. Lorinda, Jillian and Mark alone and tense in a city of millions.

PHOTO: FRANK MACEACHERN

Day Two: Tuesday Feb. 22

11:10 am Leave Boston. Pam continues to hum "Chattahoochee" by Alan Jackson. I can't take it. I feel my hands closing around her neck. God help me...Rhode Island is next. Will she live to see it?

11:23 am Multiple roadkills sighted on I95 outside Boston. Why Boston? And where does roadkill fit into the American experience?

11:52 am Pass Herb Chamber's Cadillac dealership, resplendent with 44-by-22-foot American flag. This flag is so huge it threatens to engulf the Jetta if a strong breeze picks up.

11:54 am Pass sign: "Kids Eat Free at Hooter's." I wonder if kids are the target audience for a jiggle joint restaurant? Hmmmm. Much tobacco advertising on the interstate.

Americans are nuts about littering. If you litter on the beautiful I95 in Providence (AKA America's butthole) you're out \$500. This is peculiar because Providence is so ugly litter would improve its appearance.

2:30 pm Arrive at Frank's sister's in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Day Three: Wednesday Feb. 23

10:30 am Greenwich Station washrooms. No partitions between toilets. Interesting graffiti: "All Black Niggers must die." I guess this is useful to distinguish black "niggers" from all the plaid and fuschia "niggers" in this "big ol' world. Already I can smell the American empire declining.

10:58 am Try to convince fellow passengers that watching a live taping of "Regis and Kathy-Lee" is not an option.

11:00 am Finally we are on the way to New York on the Metro North Commuter Railway. We've come a long way, and I feel a cheery Heart of Darkness kind of anticipation. Slowly, deliberately we are penetrating the behemoth we have come to know as New York.

11:30 am We pass through the world's largest collection of burned-out buildings, burned-out cars, burned-out people: Harlem. I've never seen so many broken windows and heaps of discarded tires. Lots of vacant lots. Remember Hell's Hotel? Think of 5,000 Hell's Hotels. Get the picture?

11:36 am Grand Central station. You could fit a cathedral inside here. Pretty immaculate, but I hear bad things about the washrooms....

12:15 pm Bella Napoli restaurant, West 49th Street: "You wanna table fo' five? I gotta beeeeaauuutiful table fo' five," gushes the manager. Order pizza and leave for the American Museum of Natural History.

3:45 pm Wandering through the G.E. building (AKA NBC's studios). A man approaches. "Do you guys want free tickets to Donahue?" Suuurrrr! We find ourselves watching the "Wedding nights from hell" episode. Am vaguely disturbed that I am on international TV, not having shaved in four days.

Phil Donahue has a menacing, cocaine-induced kind of edge to him. He's just a little too energetic, without any of the good nature a naturally perky person possessed. I strongly suspect pharmaceuticals. Also, I get the impression Phil genuinely hates humanity. He exhibits a thinly-disguised contempt for the audience. This feeling is reinforced when he shakes our hands later, not so much shaking them as pushing us down the line with a practised flick of the wrist. Eat shit, Phil.

7:45 pm Meet up with Jillian's friend, Lorinda, and crash at her place. She lives in an ugly brick monolith called "the O.K. Corral" near Harlem. Why "O.K. Corral?" Think shoot-out. Just a couple of nights before there was a semi-automatic gun fight out front. This is America.

Phone mom to tell her to tape Donahue. I don't tell her where I'm staying — she thinks I'm in Wolfville. We finish the evening watching America's sweetheart (Nancy Kerrigan) and the wicked witch of the west (Tonya Harding), and swilling bad American beer.

Day Four: Thursday Feb. 24

9:03 am Leave Lorinda's place.

1:00 pm Local storekeeper blown away with shotgun one block from Lorinda's. Storekeeper's son blows away robber with .38.

1:02 pm Subway. There is no graffiti on the New York subway. At least not on the lines we took. Only one panhandler, a guy with no legs dragging himself from car to car, shaking his coffee can. Most people cough up. Lorinda tells the mayor or somebody ordered a crackdown on panhandlers last month. Before that she would get asked five times a trip. Like Spring Garden Road.

1:36 pm Lunch time. In America someone is always over your shoulder waiting to refill your coffee cup or water glass. Why is that? Competition? Tradition?

2:14 pm The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Colossal. Titanic. It covers nine city blocks, standing three stories tall. I find myself standing in front of one of Van Gogh's Irises. Van Gogh's Irises. No bulletproof glass. No security cameras. No iron bars. I realize that with the help of a razor blade I could probably cause more damage than I and seven generations of my offspring could ever repay. Hard to believe.

3:00 pm As we wait for the bus to the Empire State building I ask Lorinda about the American dream and the decline of the American Empire. Lorinda is from Porcupine Plain, Saskatchewan. She brings a certain wide-eyed naiveté to the conversation.

"The decline of the American Empire? I guess what best represents that is the fact that no one can go out at night here anymore. Everyone that can afford it lives 40 miles away and goes to their country home on weekends. Those that don't have the city to themselves at night."

3:30 pm Empire State building. Observation deck. A tap on the shoulder. Someone shouts out "Mark!" It's Dave O'Connor from King's College. I begin to realize I could be locked in a bank vault in Switzerland and not escape the long tentacle reach of King's.

5:40 pm Grand Central Station at rush hour. It doesn't get any busier anywhere in the world. Believe me. Keep your head up or you'll be swept aside in a sea of trench coats, briefcases and power ties.

Day Five: Friday Feb. 25

Breakfast: Twinkies, Pepsi, Doritos and Pringles. Truly, American nutrition.

So have we found the American dream? Have we found out why the American Empire is in decline? The dream in New York seems to be to get the hell out of New York, and my time in Harlem showed me how the Empire is declining, but not why or who's responsible. The problems are the same as in Canada, just magnified about a bazillion times.

Despite the landscape of ruined buildings and ruined lives, people do smile here and slap each other on the back. I never heard a gun shot in my time in New York, never saw someone hit or swear at anyone. More research is called for.

3:30 pm Shave for the first time in five days. Will later change pants for first time in five days. Cold burgers for lunch and Tim Horton's for supper: we're home.

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First Baptist Church Halifax
1300 Oxford Street (across from Shirreff Hall)

March 6; 10:30 a.m. Worship
Sermon: - Rev. Adele Crowell
Music: Greene, Bach


Student Luncheon Sundays at Noon

March 13; 10:30 a.m. Worship
Sermon: - Rev. John E. Boyd
Music: Stainer, Bruckner, Buxtehude

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Rev. Adele Crowell
Director of Music: David MacDonald


ORIENTATION
GENERAL MEETING

All students interested in participating in the 1994 Frosh Orientation Week are asked to attend the following meetings:



March 15 & 17
12:30 pm. Room 307
Dal S.U.B.
Positions available:
Vice Chairperson*
Committee Heads

or you can pick up an application at the S.U.B. Enquiry Desk & the Student Employment Centre.



* Honorarium provided.