

Letter From Florida

by Joe Prussing

Driving Dixie Down



Did I make a wrong turn? Did I go too far north? No, I was still in beautiful Fort Pierce, Florida. What shocked me into thinking I had accidentally wound up in South Carolina was a flag: two red bars diagonally crossing a solid white background, suspiciously resembling the dreaded Confederate Cross. There it was, flying defiantly in the dawn's early light, high over the St. Lucie County Civic Center, on Martin Luther King Boulevard, no less! The shame of the South, African-America's worst nightmare, the Klan's sacred shroud, the cracker banner: the Florida state flag. Go look for yourselves.

Naturally, it had to be disguised, slightly altered, and inconspicuously cloaked, so as not to attract reprisal from those who believe the Civil War was actually fought over slavery, and that the South started it. Gone are the stars, along with states' rights. But the colors are the same as those that flew over the cotton fields of Alabama, just as they flew from the masts of New England slave ships a hundred years before. Both are tainted, but only one is despised. It's a conspiracy! The cross must be clandestinely displayed in light of the Confederate flag controversy still burning in other slave states, like Arkansas and Tennessee (where those good ol' boys Bill and Al are from), where they still proudly display the battle flag from the statehouse domes, albeit camouflaged in similar fashion: Jim Crow . . . in drag. I just had to look away.

Humming a few bars of "Yankee Doodle Dandy," I drove north (where else?) until I came to Fort Pierce City Hall. Glancing up at the towering ark, I noticed, much to my chagrin, the same inscrutable symbol of heritage and hate waving in the balmy breeze. Where are Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton when you need them? Probably out collecting more tax-free donations from the other slaves of the Democratic Party, or pro-

tecting gang-bangers in the 'hood.

Seeking the justice I so feverishly craved, I headed straight for the county courthouse. But I should have known better. There they were again! Those hideous bars, red and white; the same Southern-fried swastika I'd observed previously, challenging the courts as well as the heavens. Apparently, the Old South wasn't about to let this blond-haired, blue-eyed, transplanted Yankee taste the victory of Appomattox. Lee's sword would not be surrendered. Not yet. Not here in Fort Pierce, anyway. Maybe Lynyrd Skynyrd was right, after all, and Southern man really don't need me 'round . . . anyhow, I moved on.

Circling the newly constructed roundabout, I turned in toward the power plant to be with my brother victims of Southern hostility, and man's inhumanity to mammals, at the Manatee Observation Center. Perhaps the propeller-scarred torsos of the gentle sea cows would somehow remind me of Neil Young's real Southern man. But there, I was accosted once again by the same offensive sight: the Southern Cross. But it gets even worse, folks. This time that rebel rag was flying *above* Old Glory herself. I was crushed.

Feeling downright suicidal, I made my way to the Indian River lagoon to drown my Yankee pride and join brothers Abraham, Martin, and John in Integrated Paradise—to be free at last of those baneful bars. I would not be so lucky. Perhaps I just ain't ready for heaven, or whatever it is they call that place where all flags are the same color, or they have none at all. For there on the same banks where Johnny Reb probably fished as a boy stood the new Fort Pierce Library. Finally! A place where oppression is found only in dusty history books, or other great literary devices, even if they were written by a bunch of old dead white guys. Sanctuary at last.

And there, in front of that modern monument of truth, on a lonely pole flew my beloved Stars and Stripes, on Southern soil, in public domain, with none of the Dixie dressings attached: no culture; no heritage; no honor; no tradition; no reminder of the way things used to be; no sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves; and most of all—no bars! But suddenly she looked weak and trans-

parent, as if half her colors had been washed away by politically correct minds so pathologically obsessed with insulting no one that they offend everyone and eventually destroy everything worth living and dying for. She had changed somehow. She appeared dead in her own diversity.

Was this the same Star-Spangled Banner brother Francis wrote about? This flag which we now see flying in gay-pride parades; at feminized military installations all over the world; tattooed on the emasculated bodies of World Wrestling Federation hybrids grazing on steroids (let's pray they don't hang around as long as their paleo cousins, who at least had enough testosterone in their groins to grow hair on their knuckles); and pledged to by ghetto thugs in public school who think Jefferson Davis is the latest BET rap artist, and *y'all* is a new ebonics buzzword? This banner, which is made in China, soaked in Serbian blood, and sold to the highest bidder every four years in Washington, D.C.? This flag, which condemns the peddling of human flesh while condoning its destruction moments before birth? I think not. Something was missing. This was not the banner that draped the bodies at Gettysburg.

It was a melancholy moment, which made me think more of those old soldiers of the South, the same ones my own ancestors may have fought against. It wasn't really about slaves—Mr. Lincoln himself acknowledged that much. And who's to say Southern man would not have eventually acquiesced to his better senses and freed his slaves on his own? (Unlike some Northern proponents of the war, and some of our own Founding Fathers.) It was about the right to separate, constitutionally—and peacefully, if possible—which disqualifies it from being a Civil War in the first place. But I couldn't stop thinking about the flag, the colors; and I especially couldn't stop thinking about the bars. So, finding the nearest one, I ordered me a mint julep, whistled a few bars of "Dixie," and drank a toast to dear old Jeb Stuart . . . in the twilight's last gleaming.

Joe Prussing writes from Fort Pierce, Florida.

Letter From Barsoom

by Brian Kirkpatrick

Learning to Speak in Opar



When I was ten, I fell into the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. With him, I fled the dinosaurs of Pellucidar in the center of the earth; in the company of the anthropoid apes, I sought the fabled jewels of Opar. I wondered at the hurtling moons of Barsoom, and gasped for oxygen in the thin air of that dying world. When a storm blew my hovercraft off course in the east Atlantic, I crashed in an England dragged down into barbarism by a savage Great War that had dragged on for decades. One summer day, in a brief break from the books, my brother and I even laid out a board and improvised pieces so we could play the Martian game of chess the author had so lovingly described.

A Burroughs hero usually had to learn a new language, and quickly, simply to survive. A lovely girl who could only be wooed in her own tongue often gave a special urgency to the task. This crucial process followed a simple pattern: The hero pointed to objects, gave the English word, then heard the foreign word in reply. In the novels, this occupied a page or two at most: no fuss with case or gender, no grappling with irregular verbs. Only someone who has struggled to learn a new language as an adult can give this fantasy the bitter smile it deserves.

Burroughs' books were written for boys, but in them he revealed a great, dark truth of life: We all spend much of our lives among people who don't quite speak our language. Twenty years out of Texas, my accent still claims me every late night. For five years after college, I had to fight not to use a slang that only the residents of a particular dormitory, from a particular time, would have understood. When my son, heir to my bad habits, came home from three weeks of an academic camp, his conversation was drenched with the idiosyncratic phrases of another group of boys.

When I teased an Argentine friend about the rhythm and pronunciation of her Spanish, the conversation hurled me into an isolated, exotic world that re-

mined me of Burroughs. As we ate ice cream in a mall, she described a Buenos Aires that was as mysterious and fantastic as distant Barsoom. She told stories of hyperinflation, and the catastrophic return of Juan Perón; of ice cream eaten on hot summer nights at Christmastime; and bits of gossip about her country's dictator, invited to her wedding. She hadn't known the *desaparecidos*, the vanished victims of Argentina's "dirty war" honored by the outside world; she had been raised among the people who had made them disappear. She thought of the soldiers responsible for the disappearances as fathers and husbands, and explained that some of their children were the orphans of the *desaparecidos*.

In the United States, we often speak of Latin America as if it were inhabited by a single, cohesive people, but history and geography make other groupings, limited as those may also be, more reasonable. Music, style, and celebrities usually pass easily among the countries that once constituted the nation of Gran Colombia: Venezuela, the diminished Colombia, and the others in the northwest corner of South America. But the Argentines mix poorly with the Gran Colombians, and the short, stocky Central Americans remain isolated from the rest. Dominicans or Puerto Ricans may revere a singer from Colombia's Cali, but the Gran Colombians look down on the *ranchero* music and cowboy hats, boots, and silver belt buckles of northern Mexico.

Argentina and Uruguay, in turn, are nearly a separate subcontinent. Formidable barriers isolate Argentina and Uruguay: to the east and south, the ocean; to the north, the Brazilians, speaking not Spanish but Portuguese, and Paraguay, yet another special case; to the west, the highest mountains in the New World. Most of the Argentines and their neighbors on the Rio de la Plata are not *mestizos*—descendants of the Indians and Spanish—as are so many of the Gran Colombians. Rather, they are descendants of Germans, Italians, Spaniards, and Englishmen. In Argentina, an Italian surname is more common than one from Spain. My friend Fernando, a native of Mendoza at the base of the Andes, loves soccer, but the English game of rugby is his favorite sport, and pictures of him in a bloody high-school jersey reflect the depth of his passion. The Argentines' emotional distance from their neighbors is reflected in jokes: "Why do Chileans

love the tango? Because at the end of every tango, an Argentine dies." "When is an Argentine being unfaithful? When he quits looking in the mirror."

A Burroughs hero from Colombia, finding himself in Argentina, might want to start pointing and saying the names of things, hoping someone would teach him the proper word. In their homes or on the radio, my Argentine friends heard a Spanish unique to their country, not the language we Americans learn in school. To me, their Spanish has the inflections and rhythms of Italian, not those of the Spanish spoken in Spain, or even in Gran Colombia. My friend Cristina had to be taught the niceties of international Spanish; when she reminisced with another native of Buenos Aires, the two women rolled their eyes and groaned about classes in "Castilian." The present perfect, a comfortable, familiar construction for the Gran Colombians as well as speakers of English, exists in the far south in books but is rarely used. The Argentines even have a pronoun no other country uses: the informal *you* is rendered *vos*, not *tu* as in the rest of the Hispanic world; and *vos* has a conjugation only the people of the southern countries know. Once my friend spoke to her little girl using *vos*, then turned to me, paused, refocused, and spoke to me using *tu*. I could all but hear the shift of gears: I speak Colombian Spanish, not Argentine.

Buenos Aires, with its many millions and its history of tension with the countryside, even has its own dialect, *lunfardo*, with verbs unknown outside of the *pampas* nations, and playful variants of Spanish nouns. In Buenos Aires one may be best served by requesting *feca*, a reversal of the syllables of the Spanish *café*, when ordering coffee. (In Buenos Aires, I think that I might point, say "steak" in Spanish, and hope for the best.) In recent years, *lunfardo* has spread throughout much of the country.

A grammarian might consider the Spanish of Argentina a sign of laziness, but it is other things as well. In the far south, a new language threatens to enter the world, just as Spanish and Portuguese, neighboring languages with no Andes to climb, once separated centuries ago. In the recent past, we have seen fiercely guarded borders melt, then be redrawn; the Northern Italian struggles to understand a Sicilian: Why not a new language for a distinctive people?

We heirs to the language of Milton