

5-13-98

San Francisco

In May, 1983, the College Composition Association held its meetings in San Francisco. I was attracted to a number of sessions which I thought would be helpful to me in directing the VCU Writing Center. A number of my English Department colleagues, including my chairman, were planning to go. Several of them had their expenses paid because they were delivering papers or chairing sessions. I wasn't one of them, but my chairman thought she could partially subsidize my expenses, and she had an additional idea of how I could cut expenses: one of her friends had recommended the Basque Inn, a bed and breakfast, where rooms could be had for a small fraction of the official meeting center's "reduced" rate of a hundred and fifty dollars a night.

Several of us called the Basque Inn and reserved our rooms for the time of the meetings. I sent in my deposit for a single room and learned that the hotel was closed from two to four-thirty every afternoon, making necessary a check-in before or after those hours. Lynn and I drove to Washington to take advantage of an inexpensive flight to San Francisco, spending the night in a motel close to Dulles Airport. Paul was in San Antonio at a Statistics meeting and had a great time telling our friends that I was rooming with my chairman. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed the flight the next day, the closer California approached the more doubts I had about my living arrangements. My seat mate for the last half of the journey was an Army General who had flown over the Rockies several times and pointed out many points of interest. Despite the perfect flying weather and an entertaining companion, I worried about the Basque and the fact that we would arrive in San Francisco during the hours it was closed.



We took a taxi to the Basque. It turned out to be in Chinatown. I wondered how we would spend the hour and a half in that neighborhood until the hotel opened. Lynn simply banged on the door until Bambi, the hostess, owner and major staff worker, opened the door. She was annoyed; we hadn't gotten off to a very good start, but she did let us in and took us up the long flight of stairs to the second and only floor of the Basque, registered us, gave us keys to the building, and showed us to our rooms. She mentioned that she had just had two cancellations for the evening meal, one seating at seven o'clock, if we cared to attend. We did, the seven-dollar cost sounding very attractive.

My room was on the front of the building, overlooking a busy street with several Chinese-owned shops. In fact, we were over a Chinese grocery store, where duck carcasses, destined for pressing, hung enticingly in the shop window. My room was small but immaculate and was located across the hall from the bath. I was beginning to feel a bit better about our bargain living arrangements. Lynn and I set out to investigate as much of San Francisco as we could between four and seven o'clock, when dinner would be served. We walked up and down hills, catching a cable car down to the Embarcadero, passing the picturesque pastel Victorian row houses slanting down the hill. The sightseeing was pleasant, and we returned to the Basque in time to freshen up for the evening meal.

And quite a meal it was, too. Bambi did have help in the kitchen, but she had done all the marketing and most of the cooking of an unbelievably delicious meal of Basque dishes. She herself was not Basque, but she had all the recipes of the original Basque founders of the little hotel. The meal was served family style to some dozen friendly gourmets who told us about the dishes and suggested places we might want to go while we were in San Francisco. There was a bottle of red wine between each of the places at the table, tasty just-baked bread, fresh vegetables, and a choice of one or all of the three meat dishes. The dessert was probably delicious, too, but I had already dined too well. We asked Bambi if we could make reservations for some of the remaining evenings we were to be there, but she was booked up.

After a convivial evening with the friendly dinner guests and a few of our colleagues who arrived after we did, I tumbled into a comfortable bed. The evening was cool, the street was quiet, and I slept wonderfully until early the next morning when the Chinese population began to go about their morning business. An ancient man set up a folding chair and rack from which he sold newspapers, obviously printed in Chinese. The conversation with his clients was lively. I had a hard time tearing myself away to shower and dress for the early breakfast. That was another feast, with every breakfast dish one could imagine. I passed up the hot oatmeal and especially enjoyed my first experience with a soft-cooked egg in an egg cup, along with the thinly sliced hot fried ham and bacon. I'm not a big breakfast person, but I became a devoted breakfaster for the six mornings I lived at the Basque. The coffee cake was something to savor, and the freshly squeezed orange juice was delivered in large pitchers.

Transportation, it turned out, was convenient; we could catch a bus in front of the hotel to the meeting headquarters. The professional meetings were very profitable. I met lots of knowledgeable people and heard many interesting papers. Lunch at the hotel was okay, but at the same cost as the previous evening's dinner, it suffered by comparison. The rest of the week, I found time to eat elsewhere and investigate many fascinating shops.

I learned that after breakfast, Bambi cleaned and made up all twelve rooms with no help. During the hours the hotel was closed, she did her marketing for the evening and morning meals and probably tried to find some time to rest. We had been more than a little lucky to find her in the afternoon we arrived. We talked to other people who enjoyed Bambi's

hospitality. Most of them were Californians who stayed there when they came to town for concerts and shopping trips. We were indeed lucky to have been able to get rooms in such an amazing place.

The return flight to Richmond was uneventful, but I didn't mind after all the excitement of San Francisco, the meetings, and, especially, the Basque. The last time Paul was in San Francisco, he went by to see the Basque. Alas, it no longer exists; Bambi must have worked herself into early retirement. But it will continue to live vividly in my memories.