

You Can't Go Home Again

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One of the key themes embedded in Thomas Wolfe's posthumously published 1940 novel is announced by that book's very title, which then took on the status of becoming almost an iconic American proverb. In essence, it proposes that if you attempt to return to a place from your past, it will not be the same as it once was. To hope otherwise is to butt heads against the relentless and often unfair passage of time. As Overseas Marylanders, many of us have more "homes" and many fond memories of them beyond those of just a place of birth or one where we eventually settled down, like most normal people have. I was struck by this phenomenon even more so while watching the news unfold of the February 2023 earthquake and aftershocks that have destroyed much of the area around one of my favorite stops on the UMUC circuit—Adana, Turkey.

During my weekend breaks from teaching and also between terms, I traveled extensively around eastern and southern Turkey. I still have fond memories of places like Antakya with its historic and even ancient monuments, now all turned to rubble and dust, likely never to be recovered. Gone forever also are towns like Gaziantep and Kilis which I enjoyed exploring. So the literal sense of the phrase "you can't go home again" has really hit hard. I trust that such is also true for more than a few fellow UMUC vagabond teachers.

That is not to say that Marylanders do not also have fond memories of actual "home" towns, just like those folks who grow up, work in and seldom move far away from one special place. In fact, just about everywhere I went on the UMUC circuit seemed to bring forth flashes of my own small hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The city's name is self-descriptive, derived from the French words meaning "bottom of the lake" and established as a community by French fur traders in the 17th Century. The lake in the name is Lake Winnebago, the largest inland fresh-water lake in the USA. When I grew up there in the 1940's and 1950's, it was my whole universe. At that time there were roughly 30,000 or so citizens who called it "home". Even today, the town has not grown by all that much, still settling in at under 45,000 inhabitants.

But the town does lay claim to a couple of companies whose products seem to turn up in the oddest places around the globe. One such company is Burke Playground Equipment whose place of business was less than half a mile from the house where I grew up. Even further, my father's older brother Arthur worked there for over forty years. When I was living and teaching in Turkey at Karamursel, I had two sons who used the playground equipment there. My youngest son Christopher was less than a year old, so I had to escort him to the top of the tall slide on that military installation. On the top plate where one sits in order to go down the slide was the name "J. E. Burke Co./Fond du Lac, Wisconsin." I found the same metal plate with that engraved name on it atop children's slides on bases all over Germany, and on Kagnew Station as well. I suspect that the company had a contract with the US government to supply slides, swings and other such equipment to military bases around the world. Most people on those bases likely paid little attention to that company name, but it caught my eye immediately and, in a heartbeat, took me right back home, even though I was physically thousands of miles from "Fondy".

I noted earlier that there was a second business that operated out of Fond du Lac and that had left its mark on far-away places that I encountered as an itinerant Marylander. That would be Mercury Marine, the world's largest manufacturer of outboard boat motors. In my first memoir detailing life as a Marylander at Kagnew Station in Ethiopia, I brought up extensive details about

weekend visits to Massawa, the very hot port city on the Red Sea. The American resort hotel called the TTU (Transportation Terminal Unit) sat on an inlet that looked across to the main town and the busy port itself. To get there, one had to walk or drive across a long causeway. The first time that I made that walk, one of the first buildings I encountered had an old white and black weather-beaten sign hanging in front marking its business. When I stopped to look more closely, I discovered that it read "Kiekhaefer Mercury Marine" and my mind took me right back to my personal hometown. (I once even met Carl Kiekhaefer, the creator of the business, with an impressive long list of patents for his products. Two of my sisters also worked for the company.)

Of course, due to the long and bitter conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia beginning in 1961, the prize port of Massawa no longer resembles the steamy R&R center that I knew back then in the late 1960's to early 1970's. It has been essentially leveled. Once more, "you can't go home again" becomes a resounding theme. To see any semblance of what it was like back then, one would have to look for old photographs online or perhaps find a stray YouTube video. More accessible would be the 1973 blaxploitation movie Shaft in Africa which was filmed there as one of its locations. In early 1973, the film's star, Richard Roundtree, even paid a visit to Kagnev Station where he had lunch with two dozen base personnel at the mess hall. I was fortunate enough as a resident Maryland instructor to be invited to the event and Roundtree became one of the very first celebrities (now numbering over 900) that I ever met.

To bring this memoir back to its point of origin in Turkey, while I was teaching at Karamursel later in 1973, I made frequent weekend trips on the ferry boat from nearby Yalova across the Sea of Marmara to Istanbul. Upon arriving at "The Bull" one afternoon, I happened to notice across the harbor a bright green sign with bold yellow/gold capital letters reading "WISCONSIN". (And yes, those are also the colors of the Green Bay Packers.) I was more than curious enough to make my way over to that place of business where I found that it was the local distributor of none other than Mercury Marine. Cue the instant flashback to my hometown of Fond du Lac once again. I cannot say whether that business with its bright green-and-gold sign still exists. However, one can always check out the 1978 film Midnight Express, the story of one Billy Hayes (played by the actor Brad Davis), who attempted to smuggle several kilos of hashish through the airport in Istanbul. Through a tangled series of events, he ended up with a life sentence and had to escape to tell his story. In any case, right at the start of the film, the camera pans over Istanbul proper and if one knows to look for it and has an eagle eye, that very sign is seen on screen for a few seconds at night, glowing on the ground floor of a four-story building's lights. (As a side note, I later met two key actors from that film, the late John Hurt and also Irene Miracle, both backstage in London.)

To bring this memoir around full circle, one afternoon in December of 1972 while I was teaching at Adana AFB, I went into the downtown proper to enjoy some drinks at an open-air cafe. While sitting there, I noticed that seated a couple of tables over was a small group of obviously American women along with an American man. I stepped over to introduce myself and soon discovered that one of them was named Katherine Zenz--from Lancaster, Wisconsin. Some of you may already know where this story is going. She and her two friends were in Adana awaiting word from the American consulate about when their passports would be returned so that they could leave Turkey. They had been arrested at the Syria-Turkey border on charges of smuggling drugs. Unlike Billy Hayes, the two women believed that they had a strong case of innocence because they had been recruited as drivers by their male companion, Robert Hubbard. Unbeknown to them, he had stashed hashish in the ceilings of three VW minibuses, rented using Ms. Zenz's credit card. Other passengers in those vehicles had already been released, so the two women drivers were dead certain that they would soon be freed as well. Their male companion as the culprit was willing to

take the rap for them. However, after a long series of trials and legal wrangles, all three were at first shockingly sentenced to death in December of 1973, but then had their sentences commuted to life in a Turkish prison in Antakya (later moved to one in Adana) in January of 1974. Shades of Billy Hayes as they soon became known as the "Antakya Three". The second female of the group I met, named JoAnn McDaniel, even had a song written to commemorate her plight, called "Oregon (I Can't Go Home)" by Black Hawk County, which reached #16 on the Billboard charts in 1974. Its lyrics begin,

They say the Oregon rain will get you down,
But I hunger for the freshness of its sound;
The wind, the sun, the things that I have known before,
Now seem like faded ghosts, like shadows on the floor.

Those lines serve as a fitting reminder that circles us right back to the theme of "you can't go home again". Clearly, the song's title echoes Wolfe's as well. (JoAnn McDaniel later married Robert Hubbard when the three were finally released as part of an American-Turkish prisoner exchange in 1981.)

On my part, I still have family living in Fond du Lac, two younger brothers and one younger sister. There are also a few scattered cousins that I no longer see. But even walking down the streets that I once patrolled on my bicycle while delivering newspapers reminds me of how much the city has changed. I attended four schools there; not one of them is even still involved in education. Two have been torn down, one has been converted into senior-living apartments, and my old high school is now just an administration building serving the new high school. In addition, even the store on Main Street where I worked for six years, from my time as a junior in high school through my senior year in college, burned down leaving a huge open space between two other stores. So many memories of that place are now lost forever. Thomas Wolfe was right again.

Now, as I think back fondly on all of the military bases where I taught for UMUC, I realize how many of them no longer exist as well: Pirmasens, where I once saw Roy Orbison in concert, was basically closed in 1994; Friedberg, where Elvis Presley was once stationed, was closed in 2007; Bad Kreuznach, in an area known for its delicious Riesling white wine, was shut in 2000; Kagnew Station, a place where I lived for five years on and off, where I met my wife and where both of my sons were born, was shuttered in 1974; and of course Karamursel in northwestern Turkey, where I was stationed when Dr. Joe Arden came to my room at the Perapalas Hoteli in Istanbul on the night of Saturday, June 23, 1973, to break the news that my father had passed away in Fond du Lac and that I was now on emergency leave, was itself shut down just over three years later. For whatever the reasons, such as these permanent closures, or the mere passage of time and the changes wrought thereby, or the more horrible event of total destruction due to a recent 7.8 scale earthquake, Thomas Wolfe's prescient title rings all too true.