

Safe As Houses

by Duff Watkins '77

The character which our fellow-citizens have displayed . . . gives us everything to hope for the permanence of our government. . . . While some parts were laboring under the paroxysm of delusion, others retained their senses, and time was thus given to the affected parts to recover their health.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1801

“YEE-HAH!” YELLS Crazy Steve at the TV.

Sometime after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, Steve began punctuating life with rebel yells. Now, in deference to me as a Centre grad, and because he’s a southerner, and because he’s fueled by his favorite fruity beverage (Chardonnay), Steve barks “yee-hah!” every time “Centre” or “historic Danville” is mentioned during the vice presidential debate. Because I am a Centre grad, and a southerner, his action seems entirely appropriate so I join him, and pretty soon “yee-hahs” abound.

I’m in Washington, D.C., on business and have persuaded Crazy Steve to join me on the trip. Which is why I’m holed up with him in a hotel room in D.C. watching the veep debate on TV.

Steve is, I reckon, the last living Confederate. We’re staying in a Hampton Inn because he believes it’s named after the Confederate general Wade Hampton. (It’s not. It’s just a division of Holiday Inn. But you try telling him that!). In the two-day drive to get here we’ve listened to the 12-hour audio book of Shelby Foote’s history of the battle of Gettysburg. Steve listens for loopholes but the outcome remains unchanged. History is like that.

En route we stopped at Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson, and Ash Lawn, home of James Monroe.

Which is why, now that we’re finally here and it’s debate night, I’m looking at vice presidential candidates Cheney and Lieberman but thinking of presidents Jefferson and Monroe.

Two presidents, two homes, two styles

Jefferson towered over people physically (he was 6’3”) and mentally. He designed Monticello to dazzle visitors, so it’s filled with exotic

artifacts guaranteed to slacken the jaws of his amazed guests. His “essay in architecture,” as he called his house, was revised continually. Wherever Jefferson traveled—and he loved road trips—he came back with



Monticello from the nickel side

new ideas to implement at Monticello. It, like the U.S., was always under construction.

You’ve seen Monticello a zillion times (on the back of a U.S. five-cent piece) but probably not Ash Lawn. James Monroe was a self-made man who worked his way up in the world and held more offices than any other President. He settled in a simple, typical working farm of his day. No flash, no frills, no frippery. As president, Monroe liked balance and boldness. He named a strong southerner, John C. Calhoun, as Secretary of War, and a strong northerner, John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State. Only Kentuckian Henry Clay’s refusal kept Monroe from adding a strong westerner to his cabinet. Monroe helped put “United” in “United States.”

A thought strikes as I watch Cheney and Lieberman: in a country where loons perch on daytime TV talk shows and squawk on talkback radio, it’s good when sensible guys like Cheney and Lieberman can grab some air time too. It’s nice to see gentlemanly demeanor and hear civil discourse spoken in measured tones. It’s comforting to know that not all fellow-citizens labor under the paroxysm of delusion. Says something positive about a country’s health. It gives one hope. Plain and stable. Good qualities to have if you’re a heartbeat away from the presidency. And both these guys are safe as houses. Maybe not a Monticello. But Ash Lawn housed greatness too.

The post-debate drone of the pundits puts me fast asleep.

In the cold light of the next morning we pack the car for the long trip back to Charlotte. Crazy Steve surveys the leather seats of the rental car, now sprinkled with gray cigar ash and powdered donut sugar from the days before. The Chrysler resembles the Swiss Alps. He declares, “Boy, when you return this car they gonna’ think it was rented by a pack of chain-smoking cub scouts.”

We hit the road. In the car Steve and I discuss weighty philosophical matters:

- Which is better, Dunkin’ Donuts or Krispy Kreme?
- Why can’t UNC or UK field football teams as good as their basketball teams? and
- Who won the debate?

“America won,” proclaims Steve.

“Huh?”

“It’s obvious,” he says. “You gotta’ Jew and a Cowboy being interviewed in the South by an African-American. Is this a great country or what?!”

Somewhere, off in the distance, I reckon I hear Jefferson and Monroe yelling “Yee-hah!”

Duff Watkins '77 was a government major at Centre and is now the managing director of an executive search firm in Sydney, Australia (research@speednet.com.au). Crazy Steve is available for weddings, parties, anything, and—once again—wrote in Robert E. Lee on the presidential ballot.