

# ON GUNS, GOD AND TESTOSTERONE

June 1994



**Text and Images: John Biggs © 2009**

**[www.johnbiggs.com.au](http://www.johnbiggs.com.au)**

## ON GUNS, GOD AND TESTOSTERONE

As we fly over Phoenix before landing, I notice a familiar looking sight as I look down over a huge circular pink building. Could it be? Yes, I later find out, it not only could be but it is *meant* to look like that. Beneath me is very clearly a toilet seat. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the building just before he died, and in a farewell gesture, he made the building look like a toilet seat from his view from Heaven. Wikipedia says it looks like a guitar but Google Earth settles the matter. What do you think? It is the Gammage Building on



the campus of Arizona State University. It opened in 1964, five years after Lloyd Wright died. Here's what it looks like from the ground.



I am visiting Arizona Catholic University in Phoenix. I am puzzled: this is the middle of the desert where it rarely rains but the campus is shaded by plenty of large trees. Simple, they are planted in slight depressions, which are flooded once or twice a week. I notice that many restaurants have outside tables in the heat, and are cooled with a very fine spray of water that evaporates before it hits the diners; there are many elaborate public fountains. "Where does all this water come from?" I ask "It's piped direct from the Colorado River," I am told. "It ain't gonna last, but hey, while it's there we'll use it."

Looking around restaurants, the street, the hotel lobby, the male body language shouts: TESTOSTERONE! I see it stored either in much fat or in much muscle; rotund pears, voices resonating in booms dredged from the soles of their feet, or jocks in singlet, shorts, baseball caps, strutting mesomorphically erect, on thick, brown legs. One such guy keeps reappearing in the hotel while I wait for the bus, a huge quart can of Striker, the iron-man's sweat replacing fluid, permanently in his fist, bawls to his fat, blonde, toothy girl friend about nothing. Another big young guy with a prominent beer gut wears a T-shirt proclaiming: "This is not a beer belly but the reserve tank for the meanest sex machine in town". My word, *what* enormous testicular appendages they must have! Frightening.

Television opens the window an inch wider on this world I am discovering. *Arizona Highway Patrol* is filmed live, we are told. A man is attacking his car with an axe. A passing patrol officer stops his car, gets out, and tells him to stop. The man doesn't. The cop draws his Colt and kills

him. We are told that for this marksmanship, the officer is promoted to pistol instructor in the police academy, where no doubt he is a fine Confucian model for his students.

There are several Christian channels, which in a paradoxical balancing of some equation, walk hand in hand with the violent channels – indeed with the violence I see, smell, hear but thank God have not yet had it touch me. I watch an earnest man in a sober suit talk of the tortures of hell and the pleasures of heaven. Beside him an overdressed, overage, blonde doll, has two faces to pull: a dreamy, ecstatic face as he talks of heaven, and a pained-horror face as he talks of hell. Next up, a fortyish woman, in high heels and a cutesie dress, dances and sings to loud rock about her love for Jesus, and His love for her. He is very welcome to her.

I meet Dan, my contact for the visit. He is a very bright and gracious host, but he too fits into this paradoxical picture. He tells me of his family of three daughters. Joanne, now in her 30s, some years ago hitchhiked from Sydney to Perth, thence to Broome. At one point in her hitchhiking, her pick-up, a truckie, placed his hand on her knee. In one smooth movement, she withdrew from her backpack a razor-sharp machete, which she placed on the truckie's knee.

Dan's other two daughters, Mary Lou and Beth, aged 13 and 11, hold between them a brown belt and black belt in martial arts; Mary Lou is also a pistol champion. Dan tells me with pride that she can cut a round hole the size of an open hand in a man sized figure at 25 yards, with the six shots a .38 Smith and Wesson delivers.

"I am not a violent man," Dan assures me, "but in this society, crimes against women are greater than since the middle ages. I train my daughters to take care of themselves. This campus has an escort service. After dark, women, if they're smart, ring the escort service to take them to the car-park, they don't walk alone."

I've walked the area several times and I saw many women walking on their own at night. And typically they greet me with a big North American set of teeth and "Hi!" as we pass. Maybe the women who greet old men lurking on the campus at night with "Hi!" are the martial arts experts and crack pistol shots.

Dan tells me about Arizona's new pistol law just passed, a local State reaction to the Federal Brady Law. The Brady Law stipulates a five day moratorium between stating the intention to buy a handgun and collecting it, during which time the buyer is checked for a criminal record. But in Arizona, while you have to wait your five days by Federal law, once you have bought your handgun you may legally carry it concealed, whereas previously a handgun had to be

displayed openly, like in those ballsy hip holsters. I comment that advertising radar traps is more effective in reducing accidents than cops hiding round corners without any warning, but Arizonans don't see it that way.

Dan invites me to his home in nearby Mesa. On the way, he shows me "a very American institution": a pistol shooting range. People line up in booths and shoot at human silhouettes. Conventional targets of concentric circles are available but Dan says people prefer to practice on homomorphic targets.

"Are they allowed to stick photographs on them?" I ask. Dan doesn't think that is funny.

The most popular bullets are hollow-point. If the point is to make sure you stop someone, he argues, you wouldn't use regular bullets because they mightn't stop your assailant if you weren't a crack shot. A hollow point, on the other hand, makes an almighty mess, whatever part of the human body it strikes; stops 'em for sure. Only fools and the army use regular bullets, the latter only because of some wimpy Geneva convention. "There are 70 million handguns in the States," he reasons, "so people for their own safety should become pistol-literate. I'd prefer it otherwise but that's the way it is."



On going to his home, I meet Mary Lou and Beth. They are both so petite and so pretty. They treat me to a music recital; Mary Lou on piano, Beth on harp, each in ankle length, lace decorated, Victorian style dresses. During the recital, Dan brings out his Smith and Wesson .38, going through loading and unloading drill. Meantime, his lovely daughters play gentle American folk music of the 1800s.



What is Arizona cuisine, I ask. Basically Mexican, with lots of beef, I am told. There are many Mexican restaurants. I go to one, the tourist hotspot: good food, but not very hot, lots of refried beans, melted cheese, and funky to tacky decor, including a huge chandelier of clear glass beer bottles, funny rotating fans made of bent hubcaps, gross paintings in bright colours, a corpse-like dummy in a boat. \$30 with tips and a glass of pleasant, jammy, "burgundy", the side salad too huge to finish.

I try the top restaurant: Italian. Super service, which I failed unthinkingly to tip adequately as the waiter's look of pained amazement told me (15% is *de rigueur*, after Hong Kong's 10%, and Australia's optional round-upwards); the wine and food, a bulk house cabernet, and chicken that was soused in tomato sauce. OK, but hardly top. Conceptions of eating are quantitative not

qualitative. Yet again I stagger from the table regretting I'd eaten so much pleasant but unmemorable fare.

A post-script on Arizona or South West food. I learn in Hong Kong of all places – but then again Hong Kong is food city for the world so where better to learn the niceties of Arizonan cooking? – that there is indeed South West *haut cuisine*. Based on Mexican, true, but more sophisticated, balancing the richness of very dark high cacao chocolate with orange peel and chilli – my chocolate chicken never failed to impress dinner guests.

I thought to eat well at breakfast this morning to save having to worry about lunch, as I'm off into the desert to sight-see. Coco, my waitress at the International House of Pancakes (IHOP), is a very pleasant and confident, tall young Afro-person, who takes my order: no pancakes, their specialty, with eggs, links, or ham, just toast and cereal. Coco raises her eyebrows: "Surely two bowls, then Sir?" One, I confirm, noting the grossness of my fellow breakfasters. However I do order a "large" orange juice, to find it delivered in a glass the size of a bucket. I need two hands to raise it to my lips.

Arising from my breakfast delivered by Coco, I go to the car rental; cheap at \$28 a day, unlimited mileage. The guy who serves me is a smooth-talking earnest young man called Ronnie. After first describing the Christian church he belongs to and how that gives meaning to his life, he tells me what's worth seeing; the Casa Grande ruins down South, the Superstition Mountains out East, Montezuma's Castle and Sedona in the North. "And you will find a fine Church there at Sedona, Sir, high in the hills keeping watch over the town."



An hour later, I pull over in a lay-by to photograph the cactus. They are Arizona's signature, so lovely looking, so – I hate the word but here it fits – *iconic*. Some are the familiar giant trident, others a brilliant, misleadingly, lush green, with bright red flowers, but in actuality as dry as the desert itself. I've just finished when a large battered flat-bed truck pulls over beside me, a huge US flag waving from behind the cabin.

"Hey, Sir!"

A very tall guy, blonde ponytail, tatty cut-offs, jumps down from the cabin His long, lean face grins into mine, his startlingly blue eyes are

slashed by horizontal irises. Shit, it's the serial killer in "The Silence of the Lambs"! No, I'm thinking "Rosemary's Baby". I look again and see that this guy has ordinary irises after all; Arizona gets you thinking film scripts.

Nonetheless, I'm poised on the balls of my feet ready to sprint to my car. I see his radiator is boiling. Ah, that's the problem, not another notch on his serial killing belt. I pause.

"Know anything about cars?" he asks.

"No."

"Are you a professional photographer?"

"No."

"Where d'ya come from?"

"Australia."

"No shit. I once knew a guy from Australia. Australia better than this?" He waves at the desert scenery.

"Different, not necessarily better." I'm cautious with this guy.

"I'm George." He holds out a hand, black with grease.

I nod towards it. He can't expect me to shake the filthy thing?

"Touch my arm, then." George moves closer, towering over me.

I notice his radiator has stopped boiling. "Have you got any water? It's okay to fill up now."

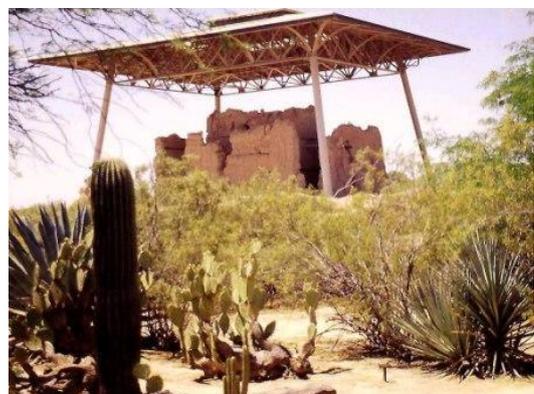
"Sure do."



The need for being the good Samaritan played out, I decide I can flee with honour. So I don't touch his arm, and with a "see ya" I move fast to my car. Mean-looking dudes in flat-bed trucks waving US flags and wanting to be touched, inspire in me a strong desire to place distance between us. Perhaps

I've been psyched out with all this talk of hollow-point bullets.

I drive to Casa Grande ruins, which were the remains of a 13th century village, with impressive mud adobe walls and structures. Built by the Hohonams who disappeared, along with the Sinagua who built large



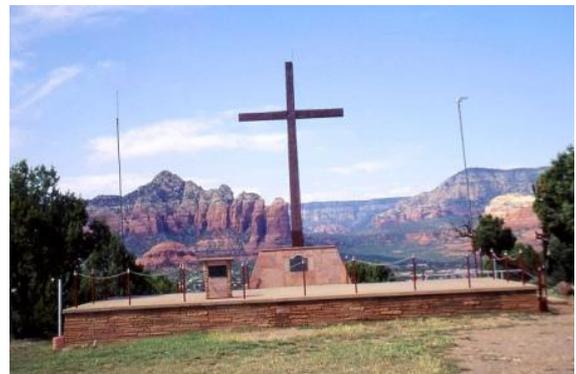
cliff-face structures, around 14th Century. Casa Grande is interesting, but the surrounding country is flat and very hot. Driving North-East to Superstition Mountains the country changes into surprisingly bright green bushy shrubs and cactuses of all shapes and sizes. I found the vegetation very photogenic.



Montezuma's Castle is not a castle or anything to do with Montezuma. It is a cliff face structure built 700 years ago by the Sinagua Indians. The only access to the village by wooden ladder, let down for each entry.

Then on to Sedona, as suggested by the pious Ronnie. Luck took me up the Red Rock scenic drive route, which starts fairly ordinary but suddenly in the road huge buttes and mesas appear in bright red. Sedona displays its priorities as you drive into it. First, on the hill as you enter the town are the Churches: Lutheran, Nazerene, Methodist, grabbing divine sites. Next come the real estate subdivisions, selling fast: BUY NOW, they urge the passerby. Then we enter the town itself, built in convolutions here and there in the hills and mesas. And there, up in the hills, is indeed the open air Church, keeping watch over its Sedonan flock, as Ronnie had mentioned.

It is really a stunning place; I don't know when to stop photographing. I wish I'd started photographing earlier in Phoenix itself.

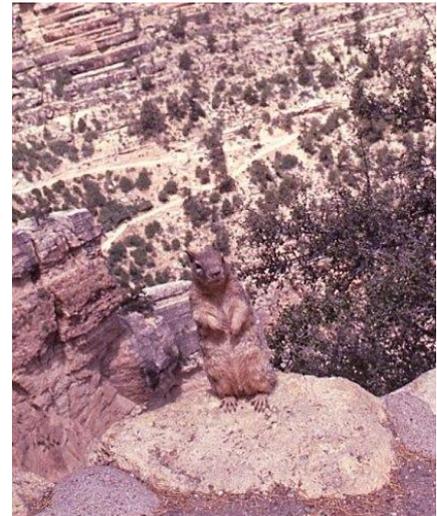


I decide to drive further to Flagstaff, and from there a very hurried trip to the Grand Canyon. 446 km long and 7 to 29 km wide. The Grand Canyon was carved out by the Colorado River over 40 million years, but probably not for much longer the way the water is being piped off to keep the city folk cool and their gardens watered. The Grand Canyon seems to have been owned by a Mr Fred Harvey, a company bearing his name anyway. Fred rose to fame in 1878 when he opened restaurants with his famous Harvey Girls to service the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe Railway. The Girls had to be young, attractive, well educated and morally pure; they could not wear makeup or chew gum. Fred was out to civilise the Wild West. Somehow he got a monopoly on the tourist facilities at the rim of the Canyon, the El Tovar hotel, the tours and tour buses that patrol a circuit around rim, dropping off and picking passengers. As we board the crowded bus, a

sickeningly jolly bus driver urges: “Pull in ya nose and pull in ya toes, for this ’ere door Ah’m gunna close. Now say Hi to ya Neighbor!”

Despite all the hokum, the Grand Canyon is a stunning spectacle. The trails wind down to the bottom. You can walk but the air is very hot and dry and you are told to take at least a gallon of water with you otherwise you dehydrate – less half a gallon if you go on the mules. I don’t have time for either, but just walk around taking photos, amazed at the little eco systems that have quite different vegetation in little pockets under the rim.

Large buck-toothed gophers sit up on the haunches and beg for titbits. Sticking out like a sore thumb from the other tourists is a busty blond, in a micro-mini skirt, plucked eyebrows, rouged cheeks, her mouth a scarlet slash. I suppose whores may ply their trade anywhere, including on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Then she squealed: ‘Hey, Mommy, Mommy, look at the cute gophers!’ I looked again and saw she wasn’t even fourteen.



I am reminded of the time when I was on study leave in Stanford University in the California Bay Area. On the front page of the local paper was the picture of the winner of the Palo Alto and District drum majorette competition. I could see why she won. The photographer had taken her looking three-quarters turned toward the camera, arms raised high, holding her baton thing, much cleavage on display, leg nearest the camera raised, revealing gorgeous thigh almost up to hip level, long blond hair streaming from her cap, a big, wide Pamela Anderson smile to warm the cockles of our, er, hearts. She was aged fourteen, according to the caption.

I shared my puzzlement with an American colleague John, tall, handsome, super nice, an ex-Vietnam veteran, as all-American as they come. He’d know.

‘How on earth could her parents allow that?’ I asked, ‘A 14 year old, parading her sexuality so blatantly!’

‘Hey there, that’s nothing to do with sex! Her Mommy and her Daddy would be just so goddam proud of their little girl. The last thing anyone would be thinking of is sex.’

You could have fooled me. But maybe I was the wrong one out on that one.

I stay to watch the acclaimed sunset at the Grand Canyon. I overnight in Fred Harvey's hotel, El Novar, and then it's back to Phoenix.



My last day in Arizona is suitably bizarre. I need to call Toronto, my next stopover. I dial from a public phone. A voice tells me to insert two dollars. I do. A different voice announces: "This call is not authorised, see 2CJ."

I hang up, no two dollars back. Bugger. How have I violated the mysterious 2CJ? I call Operator, who tells me to call 211. Yet another voice asks me the problem; I describe it.

"Would you please give your address, Sir."

"Howard Johnsons, Tempe."

"No, your home address."

"Why?"

"For the record."

"Okay, it's B11 Block 2, 25 Sha Wan Drive, Hong Kong."

"Zip code?"

"Hong Kong doesn't have zip codes."

“Hey there, you’re kidding. Is Hong Kong a country or what?”

“Yes, on the South Coast of China.”

“No shit.” She laughs and connects me.

