

St. Malo Revisited

Thungg . . . plop . . . piingg plop . . . pungh . . . plop . . . splat! Serve followed by two shots, and out. It was the kind of senseless torture we endured as kids waiting for white-legged visitors to finish up and clear off so we could get in a game or two before the next group of big people arrived to claim seniority rights to the court. Only now there were no kids waiting and, indeed, a second court -- luxury beyond all luxuries -- stood empty on a Saturday afternoon.

"Would you show these people the way out?" suggested the expensively shod self-appointed spokesman, as if this act carried with it some great benefit to us. -He was one of a foursome of Prince-raqueted tennis players, whose lackluster game had been upset by our mysterious activities searching for a way through the fence to the slough. It isn't called a slough any more, though that is certainly what it is. Rather, they call it *The Lagoon*, as if the change brought the brackish body of water into conformity with the dense-pack of newly constructed salmon-colored monstrosities which have come to displace the quaint if slightly absurd Norman-style cottages that once dotted the coastal transition zone. Our every attempt to break through the wire mesh enclosure encircling the beachside community was thwarted and we were about to admit defeat when the spokesman hailed the woman we assumed to be his mate, although it is equally conceivable she was someone he employed to keep the riff-raff in line.

St. Malo is a beachside development two miles south of Oceanside in northern San Diego county in which a group of us had grown up during the forties and fifties. It was the brainchild of a Pasadena architect, Kenyon Keith, who purchased twenty some-odd acres of hillock and sand dune bordering what was then the Maxton-Brown Bird Sanctuary with the idea of recreating the town of St. Malo on the Atlantic coast in France. His early efforts reflected his commitment to the simplicity that characterized the Norman fishing village, but events - notably World War II and the rapid development of Southern California after that - conspired to circumvent his dreams. During the war, gas rationing and the threat that the Japanese might indeed launch an invasion (anything to capture the attention of the populace) stalled development in the area. After the war was over, Southern California experienced unparalleled growth and while it was slow to show it, St. Malo felt the bite, if only obliquely. The new houses were more substantial, owing in part to the diminishing supply of beach front property in Southern California. When we sold our house in 1952, there were thirteen homes along the beach road and a like number on the hill. Today, there are at least thirty down below and perhaps fifty all told.

For me, this was a journey nearly forty years into the past as I had not so much as set foot in St. Malo in all that time. Even the journey itself - a triumvirate resolutely led by Cathy Rose, a compadre from our

childhood days who insisted we take train rather than driving - was fraught with memories befitting the occasion. It was more prophetic than I could have imagined.

Not too surprisingly, Amtrak's *Daylight* from Seattle arrived in Santa Barbara two hours late, allowing us the opportunity to get a bite to eat in case the diner was crowded. It was fortuitous in the absence of a dining car and the loss of an additional two hours while a sick child was attended to by Ventura paramedics. This pushed our arrival at the Los Angeles Train Depot beyond the window of the waiting San Diego train, so Amtrak provided a bus for the remainder of the journey. Well, almost.

At Fourth Street in Tustin, the bus veered off the freeway onto the offramp and came to a stop. The driver opened the door and announced to the passengers who were in high spirits despite the numerous delays, "If you'll move forward calmly, we'll evacuate the bus at this time."

It was cryptic until we were off the bus when all was revealed. A dragging brake on the right rear axle had started a small fire that could easily be combatted by a fire extinguisher; that is if you had one with a charge, which the bus didn't. The fire spread inexorably from the brakes to the brake fluid, and from there to tires, grease, and eventually the bus itself. By the time the fire department arrived, the flames had proceeded to the interior forcing the intrepid firemen to break windows to direct their water jets to the flames. Every iteration brought a round of cheers from the on-lookers, an interesting reaction from people who presumably own the rapidly depreciating piece of equipment. Eventually, another bus arrived, and the remainder of the trip proceeded without further incident. We were well embarked on an adventure.

The adventure, as well as any thought of nostalgia on my part, terminated the minute we reached the head of the road leading down to the beach area. What had once been a haphazard and cozy spread of cottages seemed now to be a battleground of aggressive structures bent on overwhelming one another. Things were no better on closer inspection. I chastened myself lest I fall into the trap of *the good old days* syndrome that assails me with a disturbing frequency since passing fifty. "Let it go," I counselled myself and was prepared to do so except for the lack of access to the slough.

The slough, beyond its role of habitat for a variety of waterfowl, crayfish, and cattails, was the matrix of dream and adventure that are the stuff of growing up. It had been so deep a part of my childhood, it was unimaginable to me that anyone would wish to fence it off.

To be fair to our critics, I would agree that the we were a pretty seedy lot. No, it was worse. We must have appeared to these richly accoutered sportmen and their equally splendid spice (or whatever), as travelers straight out of the sixties. Sweat clothes, jackets, backpacks, and binoculars were about as far from

their league as one could imagine - indeed, in retrospect I doubt that it occurred to them that St. Malo could provide sanctuary to such as we. If we had claimed to have been held captive in some ducting of the Van Allen belt, all would have been forgiven, but the proposition was never advanced.

"I've been here since 1938," Cathy replied, a measured brittleness adding emphasis to the words. "I can find my own way out." It should have evoked some response, but everything beyond the literal meaning was lost on the group. Nonetheless, it was nice to have it out there in the open even if it was enigmatic. Later, Cathy was to lament the fact that we hadn't done more to make them aware of the importance of our venture, and in so doing, transfer some of our experience and wonderment to them. She may have been right, though the men had more pressing matters to attend to on the tennis court and I had no sense that the women were up for adventure at this time of the day or life.

"Where are you from?" the woman asked, her tone redolent with accusation that we were interlopers from somewhere out there in the great unwashed world from which she and her friends had purchased their parole.

"I live at 2046 South Pacific Street," Cathy explained, suspecting the response.

"Oh, that's outside the gate." The significance of the gate was (and is) that it marked the end of Pacific Street and the beginning of the private road. In other days, there was a sign explaining that the road beyond was private, but there was no guard and to my uncertain knowledge, the gate was never closed. A number of members of the St. Malo Beach Association (including the drafter of its charter - Cathy's father to put into proper perspective) lived outside its confines, but I'm not sure the woman was aware of the fact. In recent years it has apparently become necessary to post a guard on the gate and establish a permanent perimeter fence to seal off the entire area, but at the moment I was not sure whether it was to keep the appointed in or the riff-raff out. "Take your pick," seemed safe enough.

In any event, this woman seized on the information with what can only be described as triumph, bestowing on her companions a pointed *I told you so* look. "See," she was saying, "they don't really belong here dressed in those awful clothes and carrying god knows what in those backpacks." I'm sure she thought we were anarchists and perhaps even Democrats. I should have asked if she had a preference, but deep down, I found it not worth the effort. My heart was content to leave St. Malo to its new stewards, such as they are. It must be hard for Cathy and others who are still a part of the beach and whose lives remain inextricably bound up with the water and land, but I fear that the old order has passed into the hands of (dare I say it?) Philistines.