



Finding Home... 400 Miles Away

Travis Barkefelt

Stepping out of Penn Station into the cold, wet mid-winter streets of New York, two thoughts filled my head: “Wow! I’m in New York!” and “Damn, is it cold out!”

After struggling to open my broken umbrella and figuring out the best route to my hostel was via the 1 Line, I ducked into a nearby subway station and was greeted by a helpful New Yorker holding the gate open, allowing me to skip the fare. Not even in the city for an hour and I already felt like a true New Yorker!

I had arrived mostly on a whim. Just deciding to get up and go somewhere “just because” is something that many people may have considered, but few are brave enough to go through with, even more so when that involves traveling alone.

For me, it was imperative. I knew before long I would be out of school, or at least living off campus, and wouldn’t have the time or money to follow such whims. What I didn’t expect during my travels, however, was to find friendship, a surprising feeling of familiarity and to be reminded of home in the most unexpected of ways.

With damp socks and a head filled with the rush of visiting somewhere new, I arrived at my hostel with a singular goal in mind: Visit Tom’s Restaurant. The façade of Tom’s Restaurant, for the uninitiated, served as the establishing shot for Monk’s Café, the iconic go-to eatery of Seinfeld.

My plans were interrupted when an employee of the hostel led me to a large meeting room, complete with free snacks and music. It was the “Thursday Night Meet and Greet.” In a New York minute I found myself surrounded by other wayward travelers, eager to be let loose into the Big Apple. By the time I left, I had gathered unto me a few companions to share in my pilgrimage to the Seinfeldian Holy Site.

Despite not being able to sleep the night before, I found myself not returning to the hostel until well after 3 a.m., carried solely by the insomniac energy of the “City that Never Sleeps.”

By daylight, I found myself ready to tackle the city on my own, my only solid plan being a checklist of various sight-seeing spots, The Empire State Building, Saint Patrick’s Cathedral and the Big M&M at the M&M’s store in Times Square. (Guess which one I made of point of visiting first?) My lack of planning ultimately led me to spend a good portion of my days underground, jumping from subterranean station to subterranean station.

Before long however, armed with my MTA card, I was able to navigate from line to line with the efficiency of a long-time resident. I was impressed by the efficiency of it all. My experience with public transportation at home, though not bad, was certainly less than stellar.

With a subway system that barely meets the essentials for

traversing in any direction but south of Downtown and buses that either showed up on time or twenty minutes late, the relative swiftness in which I could cover an area that three Pittsburgh’s could fit within was a rather notable experience.

As the days of my trip continued, I checked off more of my sightseeing list. Nights were spent deepening the bonds with my necessarily ephemeral friends. Through this process, something very strange happened. The city of New York, while never losing its mystique (I spent most of my time in Manhattan and had only four days, after all), began to feel less big, less strange and less imposing.

It was one night, as my companions and I stood shivering outside a bar on the upper West side, braced against the winter air, desperately trying to light our cigarettes against the wind, that I took note of my surroundings.

Aside from the bar and a nearby corner store, all the businesses on the street had closed for the night. In fact, in this “City that Never Sleeps” the relative lack of activity on the street seemed to indicate that this part of the city, does, in fact, sleep.

In that moment, I felt more at home than ever. The street looked and felt just as any ordinary late night side street in Pittsburgh.

To think, I had come all that way, so sure I was leaving home behind, just for a few nights, to find it again in the most unexpected of places. ●

When Mt. Washington, née Coal Hill, Powered the Nation

Travis Barkefelt

Coal Hill may not sound familiar to modern Pittsburghers, yet it's visible from anywhere downtown. What today is known as Mount Washington was once an essential generator of the industrial boom that transformed Pennsylvania and the nation.

During the 1800s, Pennsylvania led the charge in the coal industry nationwide, as well as providing valuable fuel for the burgeoning steel industry. Even before large-scale industrialization, Coal Hill, had something special: exposed veins of coal.

"That would be back in the 1700's," said Pitt professor Elise Ryan. Ryan's perspective is rooted in a class she taught called Secret Pittsburgh, that encouraged students to explore the history of the different neighborhoods of the city. Coal Hill was one such neighborhood.

Ease of access to coal was a major factor in the region developing into an industrial powerhouse. Coal was used to fuel early pig iron plants, with one of the earliest in the city dating back to the 1700s, located near modern-day Point State Park.

"The connection between being able to just get the coal im-

mediately out of the ground [and to the plant] meant iron manufacturing goes back quite a way in the region," Ryan said.

The coal that fueled the mills led to industrial developments that evolved into Pittsburgh's iconic steel industry.

"I think that it literally shaped the region...it certainly created a mindset about the region's resources," Ryan said.

Not only has Coal Hill acted as a flashpoint for the industry that put Pittsburgh on the map, it also saw the development of two modes of transportation that are tied to the city's identity as much as the steel industry: the city's mammoth stairs and its inclines.

According to Pittsburgh history site, Brookline Connection, an early example of the iconic city stairs were the Indian Trail Steps, a mile long trail leading up the side of Mount Washington to aid workers on their trek from the neighborhoods at the bottom of the mountain to work at the top.

The route the stairs follow dates to pre-colonial times and was a treacherous dirt path up the mountain used by indigenous tribes in the area long before set-

tlers arrived.

Seeking to further expedite the transportation of workers in the now highly industrialized region, several inclines were constructed, the first of which is the still-operational Monongahela Incline. The start of the incline era marked the end of the Coal Hill era, with the name of the neighborhood being changed to Mount Washington in 1876, five years after the construction of the Monongahela incline. •

