

Introduction

ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL SUBJECTS of this book, John Updike, once called his native Pennsylvania “the least eccentric state.” I must disagree.

I first became aware of Pennsylvania the Quirky as an adolescent in New York listening to the Yankees when they played the Philadelphia Athletics. Many Sunday baseball double headers ended in suspension, since no inning could start after 7:00 P.M. because of the state’s “blue laws” against worldly activity on the Christian Sabbath.

About this same time I was pleased to learn that the town of Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, had changed its name to Jim Thorpe. Only later did I discover that the famous Native American athlete had never been there—not even once—and, indeed, had never heard of Mauch Chunk.

And speaking of names, can any state top this number of peculiarities? Slippery Rock, Eighty-Four, Rough and Ready, King of Prussia, Burnt Cabins, and Walnut Bottom (not to mention Intercourse, Blue Ball, Climax, Desire, and Pillow)?

There are many dialects of the English language in Pennsylvania. Philadelphians root for the “Iggles,” and their top elected official is the “maire of Filufia.” Around Lancaster, in Pennsylvania Dutch country, many sentences end with an interrogatory—“Doncha know?”—and people go to the carwash because “the car needs cleaned.” In Pittsburgh, the question asked to find out whether you have eaten yet is “Jeet jet?” and the nation’s capital is “Warshington.”

As a statehouse correspondent, I watched the Pennsylvania legislature spend millions of dollars in a matter of minutes without debate while arguing for two years over whether the official state dog ought to be the Great Dane or the Beagle.

Where else but in Pennsylvania would a state’s two National Football League (NFL) franchises, the Philadelphia Eagles and the Pittsburgh Steelers, merge during World War II and play as the “Steagles” because of manpower shortages? (Chicago also had two NFL teams in those days—the Bears and the Cardinals—but there was never a team called the Bardinals.)

Only Pennsylvania would nominate an unknown schoolteacher to the state’s second-highest office because he happened to have the same name as a popular politician.

Where else would the first day of deer-hunting season be an unofficial state holiday, closing schools and offices?

What other state would build an infamous mental institution-warehouse a few hundred yards away from the birthplace of Dr. Benjamin Rush, who was known as “the father of American psychiatry” for his enlightened and humane views?

Nevertheless, Pennsylvania, for all its eccentricities, also has greatness, starting with William Penn. Like many other colonials, Penn made a promise of fair treatment to the Native Americans; unlike other colonials, he kept it. Pennsylvania was the birthplace of our nation and its Constitution and the site of the greatest speech in American history. It has some of the richest agricultural land in the world, and its famous turnpike helped shorten World War II.

Alas, Pennsylvania also has a dark side. Historically, its state government has been populated by rogues of almost unimaginable venality, and the stain of corruption remains at the State Capitol today. Indeed, the cost of the construction of that magnificent Capitol more than a century ago was the occasion for one of the greatest scandals in the history of Pennsylvania. And that, of course, is saying something.

Pennsylvania's care for the needy, indigent, and mentally ill has sometimes fallen to levels unworthy of a civilized society. One example of this, Philadelphia State Hospital, is detailed in this book.

Another topic in these pages is the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and it is an unfortunate truth that too often hate groups such as the KKK have found friendly venues in parts of rural Pennsylvania. In fact, one of America's first outbreaks of racial violence occurred in Lancaster County on December 27, 1763, when a group of white settlers, undeterred by the local population, broke into a jail and killed and scalped the remaining members of the Conestoga tribe—three old men, three women, five young boys, and three small girls.

My first job was in Harrisburg, where the State Capitol, with its dome modeled after St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and its main staircase modeled after the staircase in the Paris Opera, is almost surely the most beautiful of the 50 State Capitols. And is there a greater example of Frank Lloyd Wright's genius than Fallingwater, his masterpiece in the Appalachian Mountains of western Pennsylvania?

I came to love Pennsylvania's abundance of sonorous Native American names that glide off your tongue: Nesquehoning, Conestoga, Juniata. No less an authority than Charles Dickens thought the most beautiful word in the entire English language was Susquehanna.

Between 1980 and 1995, I wrote more than 100 articles for the *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*. I ranged far and wide for my research: spent five days at Heritage U.S.A, the headquarters of

the television evangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker in South Carolina; watched air traffic controllers at work in the control tower at Chicago's O'Hare Airport; rode a mule down a 1,000-foot cliff into a leper colony in Hawaii; cruised the Yangtze from Shanghai to Chongqing; hiked through a New Zealand rain forest; and explored language preservation in Iceland.

But most of my articles were set in Pennsylvania, whose greatness and eccentricity made it a fertile source for the long-form journalism that I was doing at the magazine. Over the years both colleagues and relatives have encouraged me to publish a collection of some of these Pennsylvania stories. I have picked 12, using two criteria: reader response at the time the articles appeared and my own retrospective appraisal.

I have prefaced each article with a note that includes any new information about the topic, explaining how I came to write the article, and listing any problems and amusements I encountered along the way. A final observation: Pennsylvania is, in the most literal sense, not quite as great as it used to be. Population loss and its shrinking industrial sector have earned it membership in the Rust Belt, and it has gone from being the nation's fourth largest state to its sixth largest, with an accompanying drop from 27 to 18 congressional seats.

But it remains happily eccentric. After all, what other state would have as its most famous weather forecaster a groundhog who is right only 40 percent of the time?