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What I did on my summer vacation

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills



Derek Larson on “What I Did on My Summer Vacation”

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If I were assigned the classic “What I Did On My Summer Vacation” topic for a back-to-school essay this fall the focus would be on an eight-day road trip my family took from Atlanta to Dallas in July. The ostensible purpose of the trip was to mark my 50th birthday and to see to the last of the fifty states I had never visited, but the real motive was to experience a bit of the rural South and to explore some of the iconic sites associated with the Civil Rights movement and the history of Black liberation in America.

Along the way we visited dozens of historic sites and museums, ate barbeque and okra, avoided sweet tea whenever possible, and talked endlessly about history. At most stops we were met with diverse crowds of other visitors eager to learn more about the historic roots of racial oppression in our society and the generations of resistance required to improve the lives of people of color in America. Among the places we visited were numerous locations along the recently-established [U.S. National Civil Rights Trail](#), managed by the National Park Service and spanning 14 states with over 100 sites, many of them justifiably famous—or infamous—for their roles in the battle for

racial justice and equality in the 20th century. All were familiar to us from textbooks and movies, but experiencing these places in person—and in the context of a broader conversation about civil rights and justice –made each day a memorable experience.



Rosa Parks/Montgomery Bus Boycott Marker, Montgomery, AL

In Montgomery, Alabama, we visited the bus stop where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the most effective large-scale acts of resistance against segregation in the Jim Crow South. In Little Rock Arkansas, we walked the steps of the public high school pro-segregation whites tried to prevent Black students from attending 1957.

In the wake of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education court decision schools were ordered to desegregate but

white opposition was strong in many locations.

Little Rock Central High School, still operating as a public school today, was named a National Historic Site due in part to the response to the Little Rock Nine, a group of Black teenagers who arrived for the first day of classes in September of 1959 but were turned back at the doors by armed members of the Arkansas National Guard acting under orders from the Governor. Ultimately the children were admitted, three weeks later, under the protection of the 101st Airborne unit of the U.S. Army, who were ordered by President Eisenhower to enforce the law over the opposition of Governor Orval Faubus.



Little Rock Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas



The Ebenezer Baptist Church and Pulpit, Atlanta along with the Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King tomb, King Center, Atlanta

In Atlanta, we sat quietly in the pews of at [Ebenezer Baptist Church](#), where Martin Luther King, Jr. preached and across the street from his tomb at the [Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change](#). As recordings of MLK’s sermons played, the spirit of the church—now managed by the National Park Service –came alive. The entire neighborhood surrounding the church, a hub of the historic Black community in Atlanta, has been designated the [Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park by the National Park Service](#), and is maintained now as it appeared when King lived there.



Medgar Evers home, Jackson, Mississippi

In Jackson, Mississippi we drove through residential neighborhoods to find the modest 1950s ranch home where NAACP leader Medgar Evers was gunned down in his driveway in June of 1963. A WWII veteran and father, as Field Secretary for the NAACP Evers challenged illegal segregation at the University of Mississippi and worked across the state in campaigns for voting rights and equal access. His murderer was tried three times; all-white juries failed to convict twice in the 1960s but [a retrial in 1994](#) finally led to conviction. Evers was widely viewed as a martyr for the cause of racial justice and his murder helped raise awareness of the struggle outside the segregated South.



16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama and Statue recognizing the bombing victims, Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham

In Birmingham, Alabama, we saw the [16th Street Baptist Church](#) where terrorist bombers detonated 15 sticks of dynamite in September 1963, killing four little girls as the children were preparing for services. The adjacent museum, operated by the [Birmingham Civil Rights Institute](#), places the attack in the broader context of Birmingham’s long history of racial discrimination and violence. The city-owned [Kelly Ingram Park](#) across the street uses art and opportunities for reflection to promote healing and justice.

In Selma, Alabama, we walked across the notorious Edmund Pettus Bridge, where peaceful civil rights protesters were attacked by armed police on [Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965](#), as they attempted to march to the capital in Montgomery to advocate for voting rights. [The 2014 movie Selma](#) told the story in remarkable detail, but walking across the bridge on a hot July day took on an ominous feel soon after cresting the arc, where the marchers would have first seen the armed, angry white mob awaiting them on the opposite side.



Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama

The most informative and emotionally taxing of all the places we visited, however, was not part of the formal Civil Rights history trail: it was the newly-constructed [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) in Montgomery, Alabama.



Exterior of memorial pavilion, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama



Sculpture representing enslaved people,
National Memorial for Peace and Justice

Dedicated earlier this year, the site colloquially known as “the National Lynching Memorial” gives voice to the nearly 4,400 Americans murdered in acts of racially-motivated terrorism between 1877-1950. The [accompanying museum](#) documents the history of racial oppression and violence from the Colonial period to the present, placing the lynchings in the broader context of racial violence that remains part of American culture to this day.



Markers listing victims of racial murder by U.S. county, National Memorial for Peace and Justice



Markers listing lynching victims, suspended overhead, National Memorial for Peace and Justice

The memorial presents a haunting multi-acre pavilion through which visitors walk by hundreds of hanging steel boxes marked with the names of victims and the counties in which lynchings have been documented. The sloped design of the memorial is such that these markers are at face level initially, and as one walks through they are eventually suspended far overhead, symbolically raised and

hung from above as lynching victims themselves were.

Outside, a matching set of steel boxes—now clearly representing coffins—lay on the ground in rows, waiting to be removed and placed on display in the counties where the victims they mark were murdered. Though none have yet been removed, advocates are already working to establish related memorials in every U.S. county where a lynching has been documented. Eventually, it is hoped, the outdoor portion of the memorial will be emptied as these markers “go home” to the counties where the victims were killed to serve

as reminders of the local role in this violent history.

The final element of the memorial is a quiet reflection space with a series of benches across from a wall-sized fountain on which the following is inscribed: “Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are honored here.” The scale and scope of the monument gives these victims voice, and present a deeply moving memorial to this very dark chapter in our history.

At these and other sites along the Civil Rights Trail we were struck by the sheer courage of those who risked their lives to stand up for freedom and justice, not just leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers, but the thousands of Americans who spoke out, alone or in crowds, against injustice, violence, and hatred. While the cumulative impact of visiting these many places in a relative short time was emotionally overwhelming, it was also deeply inspiring. At [The Legacy Museum](#)—the companion to the Memorial established by the [Equal Justice Initiative](#)—exhibits made the connections between the history of slavery, racial terror and murder, and our contemporary struggles with justice abundantly clear. The final exhibits in the gallery there are not about the trans-Atlantic slave trade or the Civil War, but rather are reflections on the violence, both direct and indirect, done to Americans of color every day in our unequal and unjust society. The choice of the word “legacy” in naming the museum was indeed apt.



Memorial to lynching victims in St. Louis County, Minnesota; it is hoped this steel marker will eventually be relocated to a site near Duluth where the murders took place in 1920

Toward the end of our journey we visited two somber places that weren't directly linked to the Civil Rights movement but prompted more reflection on peace and justice: the [Oklahoma City National Memorial](#) and Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. The first of course reminded us of the long

history of violence aimed at the innocent by cowards seeking to impose their will on others; the children killed in the Murrah Building in 1995 were part of a tragic legacy that spans centuries, just like the four little girls killed in Birmingham in 1963. In Dallas we visited the former [Texas School Book Depository](#), now a museum, the site from which Lee Harvey Oswald fired upon President Kennedy’s motorcade just two months after the Birmingham bombing. There we saw a temporary exhibit of photographs illustrating the lives and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both assassinated in the late spring of 1968, and featuring many of the sites we had visited on the way from Georgia to Texas.

Our summer road trip was sparked by my desire to visit the last few states I had not seen before, as a way to mark my 50th birthday and to continue the family tradition of exploring history together that started with my parents in the 1960s. A half-century is a long time in human terms, more than half a lifespan. Double it and you’re talking about a different world, a century of progress stripped away. Halve it and it’s still more than a generation’s span; time enough to experience great change. What remains constant on any scale are two things this summer vacation brought to the fore: the horrific impacts of hatred and violence between Americans and the enduring and inspiring power of hope to overcome them both.

So “what I did on my summer vacation” was take a 1,800 mile family road trip across nine states to visit a bunch of museums. But it was so much more than that: humbling, enraging, tearful, electrifying, and inspiring. The [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), a modern civil rights organization based in Montgomery, asks visitors to its museum what they will do to promote justice after their visit. It’s a very good question. What I did on my summer vacation was to try to learn more about the struggle for justice in America, to help my teenage children better understand our history, and to spend some time thinking about just that: what can I—can we—do to create a more just society?

Derek Larson

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