



"They turned the corner and soon were driving along a high, grassy bluff that sloped down to a glistening river that flowed through the main part of town. Live oak trees, festooned with cool scarves of Spanish Moss, and gnarled by a century of storms, loomed over the street. On the left, large white houses with long columns and graceful verandas ruled the approach to the river with mute elegance. Each house was a massive tribute to days long past. In one of the houses, drawling conspirators had planned the secession from the Union; in another Sherman himself had slept after his long march to the sea." – Pat Conroy, **The Great Santini** (Random House, 1976)

Well bust my britches, but invoking Mr. Conroy for my opening quote this time is a tad intimidating. Despite the fact that on the few occasions when I met him around town he was friendly and unpretentious, just a regular fellow picking out a bottle of cranberry juice at Publix. So why intimidating? Because no matter how good a writer I ever turned out to be, and I take a back seat to relatively few, at least in terms of range, Pat is simply, as a novelist, a bridge too far.

Unlike Mr. Conroy, the south never infused my soul. My brain and heart yes, but somehow not my soul. Yet. Perhaps because I've only lived here for 12 years out of my 67 on earth. I was born, raised and marinated in eight other mostly northern states.

But a lot happens in 12 years, especially if you chose to pay attention occasionally. Here, then, are my basic observations, as a quasi-local, about life in the Lowcountry. Warts and all, but quite frankly not very many warts.

1. 1) The lush landscape here is seductive and intoxicating. The sea and river vistas aren't merely breathtaking, they are a fantasy world unto themselves. A lovely contained ecosystem seems to endure the machinations and environmental stresses around the earth. Will we eventually submerge from global warming? I suspect yes, though not in my lifetime or perhaps yours.

It's funny, after having fished, clammed, crabbed and shrimped regularly when we first moved here and for years after, I have pretty much transcended all of that. I just can't seem to devote much energy into exploiting our wondrous waters any longer. About a thousand trout and five hundred redbreast were enough, thank you.

1. 2) Lowcountry dwellers are much like the Spanish moss, almost everywhere you look, hardy, gentle and reassuring. I recently met a young Irish import here who told me that she favored the polite, kind attention she receives here compared to Ireland. No pushover, she did complain about "fruits and veggies," noting that a package of fresh bell peppers costing barely a dollar back home cost four times that much here.

If people are birds, we have many more herons than hawks here, far more egrets than buzzards. Probably more hummingbirds than crows.

1. 3) Hate taxing situations? Welcome to the Lowcountry. We continue to pay less than 10% in property taxes here compared to our last home in Connecticut... in 2005!

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4) Hate frantic shoppers pushing you around? Not so much of that here. If anything, we have a touch of the "slowcountry" going on. Certain popular grocery stores that I love feature shoppers who meander down the aisles like arthritic snails, oblivious to all around them. Yes, some are ancient and some have 2-3 small children in tow, but it's amazing how gazing at a smart phone while shopping actually seems to slow . . . them . . . *DOWN*.

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5) To counteract all the darned insects down here, starting with palmetto bugs, fire ants and gnats, we have easy access to friendly and reliable pest control services. If your neighbor is a pest, you probably need to look elsewhere, however. I say probably.

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6) Ah, southern food. If you can live on gumbo, steaks and chops, endless seafood and grits with relatively little ethnic fare, you'll be in heaven here. Count me in for everything but the grits. When I need a dose of bland mush, there's always cable TV gem shopping. Or a Hallmark card.

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7) For those of us who recoil at dress codes, the Lowcountry is heaven. I thoroughly enjoy dressing down as a matter of course. Shorts, new ESPN t-shirt (thanks brother Paul) and clogs are my idea of getting dressed up. My closet full of suits and ties has been enshrined in our house, along with one standard tuxedo, worn once. Should relative formality raise its beastly head, there's always my good for all-time navy blue sport coat. Seems like it goes with any tie, or none at all.

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8) Keep on truckin', y'all. If you move down here, prepare for the truck show of your happy life. The top selling vehicle in South Carolina, as in most other states, is the Ford F-150. Pickups are *everywhere*. I recently counted six of them in a row passing me as I waited to turn onto Rt 21. Pull into almost any gas station and there they are. Some look like they seldom haul anything more serious than groceries or junior's trumpet, others look like they fought in WWII, with most in the middle somewhere. I have the impression that their owners just plain identify with the heft and power of these . . . what to call them? Monsters only applies to some, so how about we just say big guys.

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9) By the way, we're on par with most of the rest of the country, spending about \$21,000 per vehicle. So we're not broke.

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10) Lots of these trucks can be found, of course, at construction sites. I often like to chat for a moment with the workers as I walk Dixie, providing they can spare a few seconds or talk while working. One thing that almost always comes across: if it's a private property, you will see little use of safety equipment like glasses, gloves, belt and pulley arrangements for roof workers, and so forth. Crew chiefs tell me they're not obligated by law to wear them (though they are for commercial construction) and many of the men feel the equipment slows them

down. Is that a southern thing or a macho thing or an economic thing, to use a circular saw without safety glasses? I'm still hammering away at that one.

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11) Come here for the arts. Easy to say in this newspaper, I know, but it's for real. Whether your deal is photography, lithography, water colors, oils, theater, dance, music of all kinds including symphonic, or movies (hello BIFF!), this area is one of the great artists' attractions in the nation. Gumbo afterward or a plate of oysters with a cold beer or sweet tea? You have come to the right place.

Yep, living in the south ought to be awfully good for your head, heart, soul and stomach. Should you come from the Northeast, just plan to recalibrate your politics here. There are some Democrats, certainly, but they are vastly outnumbered by that other national party that used to stand for conservatism. The Buckley or Kemp kind.

And maybe, just maybe, it will again. Right after my arthritis is cured and barbeque joints stop serving pork and coleslaw. In the meantime, soak up some sun, tell a veteran or service member at Parris Island or MCAS you love them, and have a wonderful day. Just a friendly suggestion.

Praise the Lord and pass the shrimp, please!