

# Horse Hairs In My Soup

*Horse and Wagon Travels Across America*

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by

**JOHN COFFER**

And his horse

**"BROWNIE"**

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## Preface:

*It is now the year 2010 and I am very much settled down on my own 50 acre small farm here in the beautiful Finger Lakes Country of upstate New York. But, back in 1978, at the age of 26, I started on a journey that would bring me here entirely by covered wagon and would last for over seven years, traversing the continent twice on a zigzagging path through 36 different states, and over 11,000 miles. Perhaps the word journey is not quite the right word to describe this period of my life. That sounds a bit too much like I was just on a trip. A, "where to where?", as some would shout out to me in passing. In fact, it was something much bigger and rooted deeper inside me than just a trip by wagon across the country. In fact I never started out with the intention of going that far. Things just worked out that way. In a sense I wasn't on a "trip" at all. My covered spring wagon was home. Where ever it was, and my noble steed Brownie was, I became a temporary resident. No, I wasn't just a guy out seeing the country by horse drawn wagon. I was America's only horse drawn traveling 19<sup>th</sup> century style photographer. Actually, I was the last horse drawn itinerant photographer in America doing photography of any shape or form, as I went along for a living, let alone one exclusively using late 19<sup>th</sup> century methods.*

*But why horse drawn? The short answer to that is it seemed to completely fit me to a T and I liked it and still do for that matter. Clearly it was from the heart as much as it was from the mind. Simply put, I was just being me in a very big way.*

*There are lots of reasons why the life seemed to fit so well. One fun one, and probably one most people would have a hard time understanding at face value, is it gave me the perfect excuse to go slow! Yes, Blessed Beautiful Slow in this hurry up faster and faster helter skelter modern society. The world often associates slow with frustration. For me it meant savoring every moment in life. The kind of slow that crystallizes and magnifies every sight, smell, sound, and stillness around you. This kind of slow resulted in a kind of rebirth experience. Like learning to walk again for the first time, tasting, smelling, hearing, feeling all things new again. Going along at an easy clip clopping pace, cresting the next hill to see what I might find over it and then the next and the next after that. Time itself slowed way down. Suddenly, I seemed to have all of it in the world. This was even infectious, as people along my path who otherwise would have little or no time for me suddenly lost all sense of it and so often poured themselves out to this interesting traveler and his big brown teddy bear of a horse.*

*Yes, being able to take "my time" was a fine reason to take up the horse drawn road life. But, like I said before it wasn't the only one. Many other reasons I was unaware of until I was out there doing it. So, climb on board the wagon, catch a few horse hairs in your bonnet, and I'll explain and expound on the many others as we make our way "slowly" across America!*

## *Dedication:*

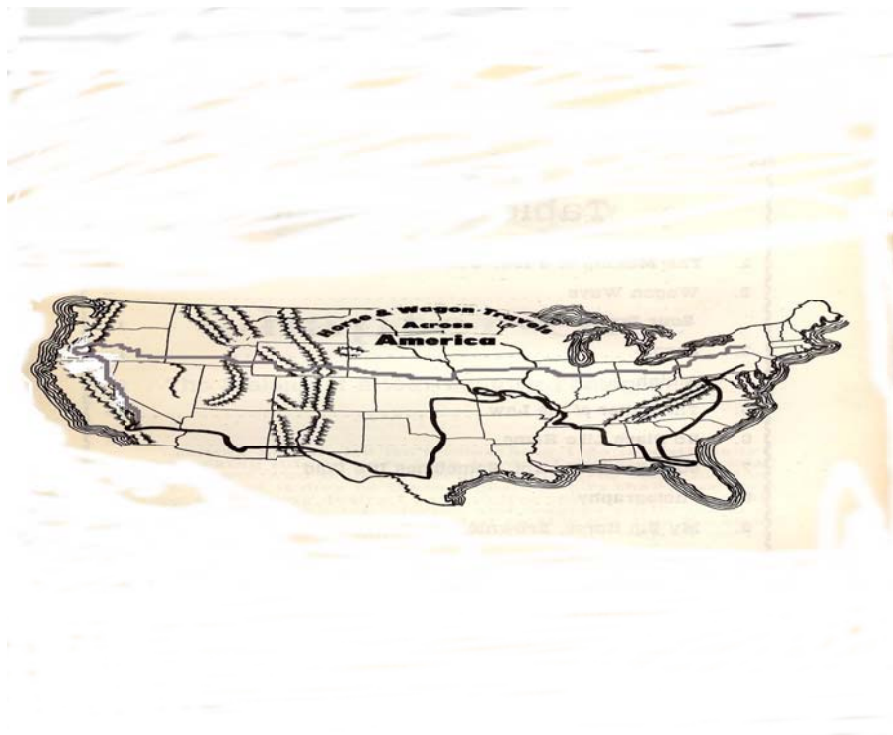
*Clearly, this book must be dedicated first and foremost to "Brownie". His was the strong heart that pulled it all off. Nothing good or significant happens in this world without heart! Actually, I thought I might have to pull my wagon all by myself for lack of the right horse. Then Brownie stepped into my life. It was not love at first sight of this roly-poly sleepy eyed, lower lip sagging, big footed, plain as they come, eight year old bay plow horse. But somehow a life long match had been made. He was a winner not with speed, but, by his steady plodding faithful determination. The kind that won the fabled race between the turtle and the hare. Brownie and I were a team doing "what we were supposed to be doing". He changed my life in so many ways. He was a great teacher to me about horses of course, but, more importantly, life in general. He clearly touched a lot of people's hearts and minds where ever we went. I believe he even changed the course of photographic history by getting me all the way across the continent to a dusty stack of old photography manuals and papers from the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which gave me the information I needed to revive the nearly lost art of wet-plate collodion photography and eventually teach it to many others. Yes, because of Brownie many hundreds if not thousands in recent times have been able to enjoy this fine old and very beautiful and fun form of photography. Brownie was the hook that brought it out of obscurity. It was mostly because of Brownie I was interviewed by papers all over the country, featured in national magazines, and interviewed on big time network TV. The TV cameras would pan to Brownie munching the grass along the roadside while I expounded on the life of a 19<sup>th</sup> century horse drawn photographer and the totally unique and authentic photographic process I was doing. No, it wasn't this guy or that guy super connected opportunist come lately, that first put wet-plate photography on the radar screen again. No, just a chunky workhorse named "Brownie".*

*Brownie lived a very long life for a horse and after several years of total retirement, he died peacefully in the big horse pasture here at "Camp Tintype" at age 34. He has a special split rail fenced in grave site with an apple tree of the variety called "Liberty" planted over him.*



# Acknowledgements:

*I'd like to thank my publisher, but then I don't have a "publisher". Well then I'd like to thank my editor, but I don't have one of those either. Actually, I never had any plans to write a book when I started out on the wagon travels. I scorned the idea, when the subject was brought up. Just wasn't why I was doing what I was doing. Moving right along with bunches of gratitude, I'd like to thank my truck driver. But, nope, I didn't have one of those following me along with extra supplies and porto-potty or hauling me over the rougher spots or back to the ranch when it got too hot or too cold. No, absolutely not! Brownie pulled the wagon every step of the way. In fact he never set foot in a horse trailer or stock truck his whole life, as far as I know. But, I do want to thank those truck drivers who were wise and good enough to pass us wide and carefully. Many weren't so kind that way. O.K. fine then, I'd like to thank my sponsor, but what sponsor? No grants, no rich uncle, just my own boot straps and a lot of kindness and generosity from hundreds of complete strangers all along the way. Many never gave their name nor asked mine, just wanted to help and expected nothing in return. I won't attempt any short list here of those who did give me their name, as you will read about many of the more significant ones and meet them alongside me and Brownie as we amble down the back roads and by ways of this great country. Couldn't have done it without you America! Thanks!!*



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# Chapter One

## Beyond the Interstate

Florida sunshine poured through the window. On a soft breeze, a sweet orangey fragrance from the orange trees below blew in as well. I was half out of bed stretching my long limbs over me pulling myself out of dreamland into the day at hand. “Things to do, places to go, got to get going”, I prodded myself up. To a ringing phone I went. The wide awake voice of my best friend, Gary, greeted my groggy “yea”. “Hey, JC, wanna go to the beach?” I leaned up against the window sill and looked out at a perfect blue sky. It was a perfect mid-summers day. My surfboard was starting to collect dust in the corner of the living room.

“Surf’s up and I bet there’s plenty of good bikini watching down by the pier today.”

“Nah,” I told Gary, “can’t go.”

“Hey, man, what could be better than that?”

“I’m heading out to Tennessee to do some Tintype Photography. Some other time, O.K.?”

Gary was determined to go anyway. I wished him luck with the girl watching and he likewise with my Tintyping. I hung up the phone. “How many available scantily clad chicks did we ever meet at the beach anyway?” I thought. The kitchen cupboard was almost barren, except for a couple pieces of dinnerware, a few thin aluminum pots, a cheap K-Mart fondue set, and a cork screw. “Something simple,” I thought as I poured a bowl of Cherrios into a plastic bowl with whole milk over them. With my complete breakfast in hand I moseyed into the living room and sat on the only piece of conventional furniture in my condo, my black fake leather over stuffed couch. The rest of the furnishings I had made myself out of cardboard. Well, to be more exact, out of carefully layered corrugated recycled cardboard, cut from simple pattern designs of my own creation and glued together layer after layer to produce an extremely strong structure. I liked the idea of throw away material becoming something very solid, unique, and good looking. In the corner sat my surfboard with Borden’s Elsie the cow’s face emblazoned on it, starring back at me. I got the idea off a carton of milk. I’ve always been a milkaholic. Both seemed to separate me from the run of the mill surfer crowd. In the other corner sat my scuba diving gear. Beyond the crashing waves was a world I had aspired to more than any other. For \$60.00 or so I could catch a boat and spend a few days on the Bahama reefs. I was among those who feverishly strapped on their tanks and bailed out over the side for the depths. After the big splash the body became instantly weightless. Schools of fish passed through the trail of air bubbles I exhaled as I glided down to the sea floor. Then, looking back up through the crystal clear water, the boat at anchor looked like a balloon on a string.



Translucent plant-like animals waved in the currents. Fishes faces showed alarm or disinterest when I appeared. Odd creatures, thick necked with bulging eyes, stared out from crusty holes. I proceeded with caution, always armed with an underwater camera.





It was a whole world unto itself. I strove to capture the faces and environments, animals and plants ensnarled in the crusted canyons of the coral below.



Now my scuba diving equipment and underwater camera were as dusty as my surfboard in the corner. I finished my cereal. It was 1976, the Bicentennial year. I got dressed into jeans, a white shirt, suspenders and a vest. I was on my way to an event where I'd try my hand at 19<sup>th</sup> century portraiture. By trade I was a commercial portrait photographer. Historical photography was something new to me. I maneuvered my car, an unassuming '65 Econoline van, out of my parking space and proceeded down the road past orange and grapefruit groves.

I found myself glancing in my rear view mirror to check on things in the back end: the painted backdrop, the cardboard boxes filled with chemicals and props, and, especially, my big antique 8x10 view camera. I scanned its polished mahogany surface. It was a relic, about 80 years old. I was in awe of its careful, sturdy construction. What an incredible find that was! I looked again in the back and felt as excited about this camera as the day I'd found it, two months before.

I'd been on my way back from the bank after just cashing my pay check. I stopped for a red light. Glancing to my right at a run down little shopping plaza I noticed a vacancy had been newly filled. It was a buy-sell-trade camera store and in its front window was the camera that at first glance, I knew would change my life. I quickly whipped into the plaza and walked into the store and asked how much for the old camera in the window. "Oh, I just got that one in. How's \$50 dollars sound to you". Normally I'm a natural born haggler, but this time I couldn't get my wallet out fast enough and told him, "I'll take it". He seemed quite pleased and even threw in a bunch of film and plate holders and a beautiful book on the life and work of F.J. Haynes who had been a well known photographer of the American west from the 1870's to the turn of the century. Once home with the camera on my dining room table I ran my hands lovingly over it. I couldn't get over how supple the old original bellows was and how the beautifully turned mahogany knobs made the many shifts and movements. It had an 8x10 back and also a 5x7 back that could be attached as needed to its sliding rear that allowed one to put multiple images on a single plate. Any collector of old cameras would agree that \$50 was a bargain price. For me it was a gold mine!

And what became of the old man and the store? A few weeks later I drove by the same plaza again. Gone. Yep, he'd vanished. Just an empty storefront. Had he been an angel? Maybe he was old F.J. himself.

I love portraiture, but lately my work at the studio had become boringly routine. The first couple of years had been fine. I liked the flashy image, the travel on assignments all over the state of Florida and the financial security. Photographing beautiful models from time to time made it even more interesting. But still something just wasn't there for me anymore. The studio had a canned and commercial approach to portraiture and photography in general. The big smiles, the flash, the color prints, that faded all too soon, and the aura of glamour that surrounded the whole scene began to grate on my greater sensibilities. Something deep within me was intent on something more significant and long lasting. The theme of my photography was ready for a twist of the dial.

The month following my big beautiful old camera purchase I did some

experimenting. I discovered a company in New York from which I could order dry plate tintypes. Using Gary as my model I achieved some promising results, so I was looking forward to this first try at be a commercial tinker. I arrived in Union City, Tennessee, two days later, a little after noon. The event was billed as a Civil War Skirmish. I'd never been to such an event before but knew a little about what to expect. People who love Civil War history get together and reenact it, omitting the bloodshed of course.

As I pulled up I saw a shady park and field beyond the parking lot where people, mostly men, were gathering in their civil war uniforms, with guns and cannons and all. Others were still arriving and unpacking their cars.

I pulled my van up closer to the activities and parked out of the sun under one of the big cottonwood trees. As I proceeded to unpack my things, my attention strayed toward the activities. I enjoyed looking at the Confederate and Union uniforms the re-enactors wore. They were newly made but in every detail like originals. Various re-enactors were busy cleaning their reproduction and original civil war period black powder guns after having competed in competitive target shooting matches individually and in teams. I would have liked to join in with them as I had long been a Civil War gun buff and shooter. But, I was even more excited about the tintype pictures I hoped to shoot rather than clay pigeons on plywood backstops and even a telephone pole in half. Yep, they actually did topple it over in just a few minutes time by massed volleys.

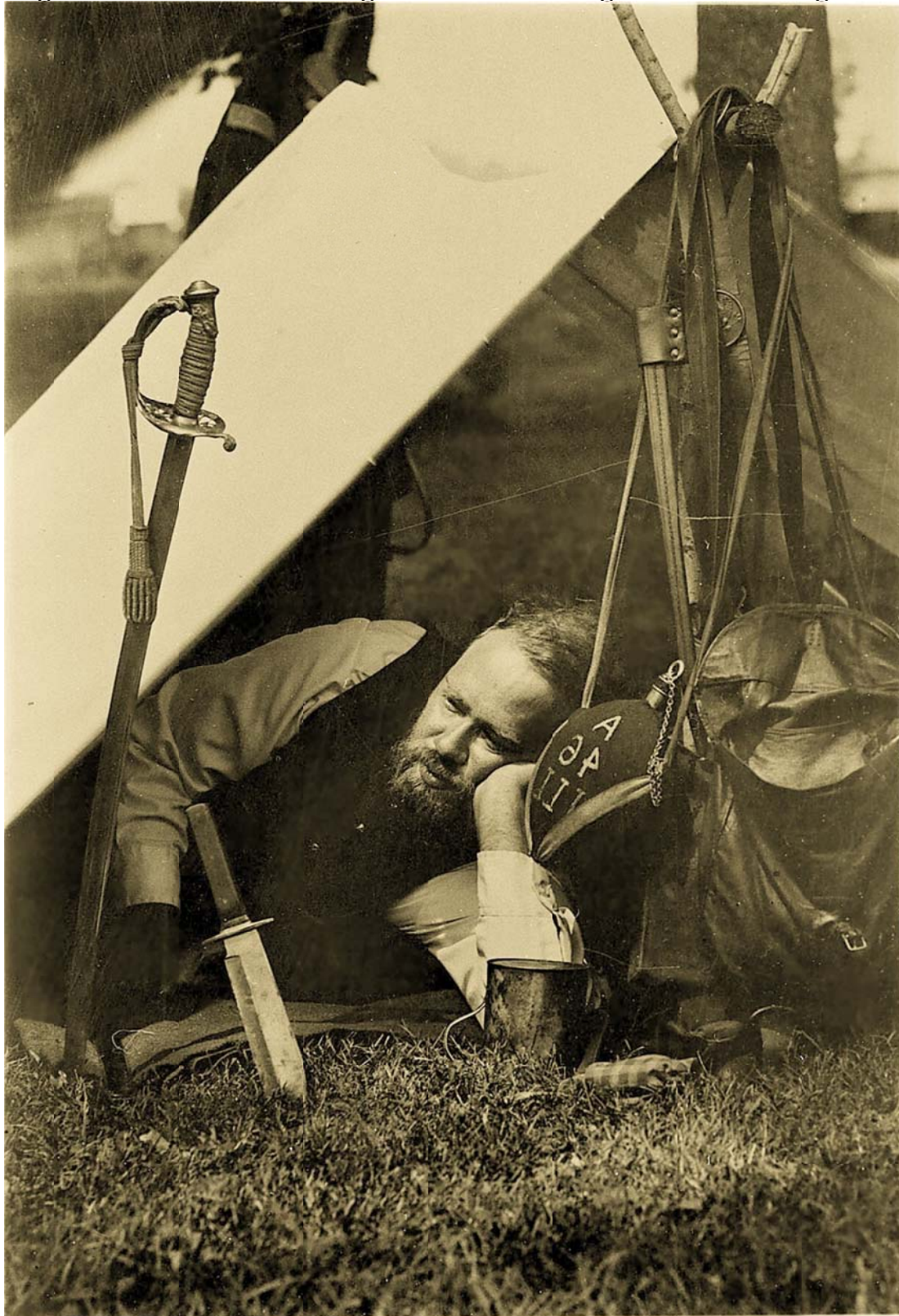
I assembled my background. It was the not very authentic one I used in my modern portrait work. Bright blue swirls dashed across it, causing me to almost grimace as I unrolled it. How inappropriate, I thought to myself. But, I was proud of the sign I'd recently made. It was painted on heavy, cloth-like paper and was rather ornate, in a Victorian style, announcing "J.A. Coffey, Tintypes". After I'd hung up the sign I set my antique camera on its tripod. Now I was open for business.

As the day wore on, I attracted quite a few customers and enjoyed my work immensely. I knew this would be something I'd want to do again. Next time I'd be better prepared. The moment I'd arrived I'd been attracted to the style and eye for detail which some of the re-enactors had. I wanted to be more thorough myself, more knowledgeable and better equipped. Toward the end of the day the re-enactors that interested me most erected their tents and set up their military camp nearby. Quite a few of the men were relaxing around an open fire, talking. After I'd finished up with my tintype-making duties I went over and sat down amongst them.

Some of the men were cleaning their guns. Others were chopping wood and cooking over other small fires in front of their tents. The two men closest to me drew me into a conversation about the finer points of authentic footwear. I was also intrigued by their understanding of specific Civil War battles. They talked about it as though they had really been there.

A big cast iron pot hung over a nearby fire pit full of delicious smelling beef stew. One man who'd been putting coals all around and over a cast iron pot shouted with joy. He lifted the lid with a hooked stick to reveal golden brown biscuits. I was offered a plate. Soon everyone was eating to their hearts content. When dinner was over some men led the others in songs of victory over the

Confederate troops. The flames crackling and the men singing were very magical. Then someone setting on a cottonwood log across the fire began to talk.



“You were taking some pictures today,” the man in the officer’s uniform said. I nodded. Speaking to the group I sort of apologized. “This is my first time doing this sort of event. I think I’d like to do more though, after I do some more research. “Quite a few ears pricked up at this. One man exclaimed, “You do real tintypes, don’t you? Not those brown toned Polaroid things.” I nodded again. This sparked a conversation on the history of civil war period photography amongst the group.

I realized the care and scrutiny with which these men pour over old photos. It only made sense. Photographers thoroughly documented the Civil War and handed down a wealth of visual information through their work. “Everyone knows about Matthew Brady,” one bearded soldier interjected. “But do you know how many photographers there were during the war? Hundreds.” A short stocky fellow wanted to tell about the traveling photographer’s wagon he’d seen at the Smithsonian Institute in D.C. But before he could finish, a thin young soldier behind him shouted to me, “You should get yourself a horse and wagon. No Civil War encampment was complete without a horse-drawn photographer!”

“Yep, sure be nice.” He added.

They all agreed it would certainly be the epitome of what re-enacting was all about. But after the voices of approval settled down, the fire’s crackling became the center of everyone’s attention. The horse-drawn photographer idea was fun but it was futile to discuss much further. They all knew it was a fantasy. No one could begin to imagine how to make it come true. Besides, the fire was dwindling and it was time to go to bed. I went off to my van, exhausted.

But I didn’t fall asleep right away. Being with the re-enactors had excited me and made me recall a certain man I’d met a year or so before. I’d been out along the beach contemplating footprints in the sand. I was looking for something to photograph. Then I saw something which took me very much by surprise. Coming along the shoulder of the highway that paralleled the beach was a man riding a horse and leading a pack horse. I made my own footprints in the sand, very deep ones, as I ran to catch up. When I reached the travelers I was clutching my camera and gasping for breath. “Hey, where are you going?”

The man pulled up his horses and looked at me. I asked if I could take a picture. He nodded yes. I clicked a frame off with my 35mm. He was strong looking but, judging by his wrinkled and weathered face, probably pushing 60. “Out travelin’,” he said. Then he volunteered, “I’m retired from the Air Force, left Arizona . . . And plan to keep going.” That was all he said. He was dressed simply with a felt hat pulled down to shade his face. His horses stood calmly. They were obviously well cared for. He clicked to them and they walked on. I took another quick snapshot and decided to let him be, for now that is. Fate had other plans for us to meet again. But, the roles would be reversed. The questions I hadn’t time to ask or think of, I would know by heart by then.



The next morning was full of more Tintype making activity. By early afternoon it was over. It took me a little longer to pack up than the rest of the participants. By early evening I was on my way back to Florida. I was quite pleased with the weekend. My wallet was full and so was my heart. I decided to take a small country road for a ways and then get on the Interstate. I liked driving slow and not having to keep up with the usual fast traffic on the main highways. In fact, I had been stopped on the Interstate once for suspiciously going about 45mph.

A blue station wagon up ahead signaled to turn. I didn't swing out to pass but reduced my speed even more. The car turned off toward Gooseburg, Tennessee in the distance. My eyes followed the car and then strayed to consider the green fields and the farms illuminated by the red setting sun in between. I thought about my various treks across the country. Then I realized something: I'd always been traveling in a plane, sailing over-top miles high. Or else I was passing through on the Interstate. I hadn't seen or experienced much of

anything going like it was a race down the four lane. It was a race to oblivion.

As I buzz along so mindlessly, what is really out there? What is life like beyond the Interstate, I wondered. That's when the pieces of the puzzle gathered themselves together and created a whole picture in my mind as bright as the setting sun. Looking down at my hands I thought, "I don't need to be holding this steering wheel. I could be holding a pair of reins instead. There are plenty of back roads. Like the traveling photographers of a century ago, I could wend my way as I went, doing portrait work.

New seeds had firmly been planted in my life. First the antique camera, now this idea. Not that I quit my job and headed out the next day, the day after that, or even months later. The changes were slow and subtle, centered deep within. Over the next couple of years I pursued historical photography and thought more about the direction my life was taking. Sometimes I felt that traveling in a horse and wagon with my antique camera would be a great adventure, something I was perfectly suited to do. Other times it seemed far-fetched. Maybe it was just a wild idea that occurred to me one Sunday night on a drive back from Tennessee.

**The adventures of John and Brownie to  
be continued.... Be sure to stay tuned for more  
chapters coming soon to a computer near you!**