

# Chapter Eleven

## Southern Sleigh Bells

I continued south through flat farm country. I had my sights set on a well known outdoor living history museum in Tifton Georgia. It was several days further down the line. I enjoyed my time spent going through quiet backwater towns and meeting some of the nicest people I'd met so far in my journey. The national media's depiction of the deep south as being full of mean, ignorant rednecks sure seemed like a gross exaggeration. The only time these Southerners showed a contrary streak was when they argued over whose house I'd be eating and staying at.

A small town reporter who'd moved to Georgia from up North once told me, "If folks down here like you, they love you. And if the don't, you better clear out because they will totally hate you."

There was indeed bigotry down South. But in Southerner's minds, it wasn't the completely hateful attitude Northerners liked to think it was. Southern farmers I talked to liked to explain their interaction with black folks as a symbiotic relationship. They needed labor and the blacks needed work. That work, of course, was the low paid, hard labor variety, but at least it was good honest work. They had heard about the black crime ridden ghettos in the northern and western big cities with high unemployment. Segregation was not by law anymore but it was still the unspoken reality. The blacks had their side of town and the whites had theirs. Virtually no white family of any means sent their children to the public integrated schools. They sent them to the all white "academies".

One evening I was eating dinner with a typical southern white family between Hawkinsville and Tifton when the subject of the black dilemma came up. My middle aged host told me a story to illustrate how he and a lot of his friends and family felt.

"Once there was a black boy who'd heard how wonderful life was up in the northern cities. One day he decided to get himself up there to paradise. Upon arriving and after a short stay, he found out that his black brothers and sisters were living a wretched existence in a crime ridden filthy ghetto and there weren't near enough jobs of any sort to go around.

Flat broke and disgusted, he decided to walk back home. After a few days, tired and very hungry, he asked for food at houses along the way. One

after another they answered the door and told him, 'Get on down the road, black boy!' He kept walking and kept getting told to get on down the road. Finally one day, he knocked on the door of a farm house and made his plea for something to eat. The lady who answered the door said, 'Get on around to the back door, nigger!' The black boy threw up his hands and shouted, 'Thank God I'm home!'

I chuckled along with everyone else, but thought to myself, I'm sure glad I'm white and didn't have to get on around back for some kitchen scraps.

The towns of Finleyson and Rochelle seemed to stand out the most in this leg of my journey. The first was a mere wide spot in the road with nothing of interest in it except for the Finleyson Bank. It was a small red brick building with a tall ornate false front on it like one might see in an old west ghost town. Actually, Finleyson was pretty much a ghost town. A large foundation and debris stood by the bank. This was where a general store had once stood. A lot of small towns out in the country seemed to be fading away as more and more people left life on the farm and headed for the big towns and cities to live.

I was in luck. Old Mr. Finleyson himself came out to greet me and give me a short history on the Bank. It had been built by his father in 1910. The then young Finleyson had been its head cashier till the bank closed in 1969 due to a rash of robberies. But, he was proud to point out it had been one of only two banks in Georgia that didn't close during the great Depression. Mr. Finleyson still used the building as his office. As we parted company, he went into it and soon brought out a shopping bag full of paper shell pecans for me to take with me on my travels.

The next day Brownie and I stopped for a lunch break in a clearing by a falling down, abandoned old farm house about a mile and a half outside of Rochelle. Before I could get into my grub, some residents of Rochelle stopped to talk.

One man piped up, "You like hamburgers?"

I said, "Sure do!"

"I'll be back with your dinner in fifteen minutes,"

Soon the local newspaper reporter along with a couple of high school students who were reporters for the Rochelle High School newspaper arrived to interview me. After a bit, my lunch of hamburgers and fried onion rings from the mom and pop quick food joint in town arrived. I barely had time to wolf it down between the barrage of questions.

One man informed me that the keys to Rochelle (pronounced Row Shell by the locals) were at my complete disposal. After an unusually long lunch break, I got back on the road and cruised into town. Beneath the lone traffic

light stood the entire Rochelle Police Department. His dress reminded me of a marine in full parade uniform. I was sure he was waiting for me because there wasn't any other traffic to direct. He welcomed me and shook my hand, offering his assistance while I was in town. I was especially impressed by his hat, which had gold stars and braids all over it like a general might wear.

It seemed like the whole town came out to see me. Small crowds were on the street corners watching and waving. After a couple of blocks I came to the high school, which I had promised to stop at. I parked out front, taking Brownie out of the wagon shafts and took him to a patch of grass in front of the school and held him on a lead rope while he grazed. Some teachers and their students came out to talk. I could tell these older kids weren't as interested in my way of life like the younger grade school children I'd given talks to before. More than one of the high school students couldn't fathom how I could or would want to live without a TV. I was thinking I might say something in response to this when one of the teachers urged me to leave her class with some words of wisdom.

I said, "When you get home, throw a brick or the nearest heavy object through your TV set. Then use the cabinet for a book shelf so it won't be a total waste."

The kids roared in disapproval at my remark, but the teacher said she thought that was an excellent idea.

That night I camped at the man's place who had brought me the pile of hamburgers for lunch. Brownie got a nice grassy pasture to himself. After supper we attended a church revival meeting at the local Baptist church. I was expecting to see a lot of 'Slaying of the Spirit' falling down and people rolling on the floor, but it turned out to be a fairly subdued recharging of the church fellowship's Baptist batteries.

The next evening I camped by a large pond. I'd gotten permission from the owner, who lived a good distance away, across a very large hay field. When I told him I had driven my rig from Pennsylvania, he thought I was fibbing.

"You mean to tell me that fat horse walked all the way from there? Now, that's hard to believe, young fella."

The man was quite serious about his doubts.

I told him it was all true. I went on to explain more about what I was doing and even pulled out the scrapbook I was keeping that had a good many newspaper clippings in it already. With that, he gave me the benefit of the doubt and went home.

Camping by the pond was quite nice. It was secluded, surrounded by a stand of tall pine trees. With the farmers permission I built a large campfire.

There was a lot of dry wood nearby to burn. I really enjoyed a rare night of absolute solitude after so much interrogation over the past few days. The stars shown brightly as I ate a simple warmed up supper out of a can. It had been many miles and a few states since I had enjoyed the glowing warmth of a campfire all to myself. That night the serenade of the frogs along the edge of the pond lulled me to sleep.

The next morning it was foggy. I took my time breaking camp, waiting for the fog to lift. Eventually it did clear enough to safely head out. As we went up the dirt path toward the paved road a young man and a young woman stepped out of the woods by the pond and started walking across an open hay field between me and them. The man had on what looked to be hunting attire and carried a shotgun under his arm. Suddenly a buck bounded out of the woods only about thirty feet in front of the man and woman. Frantically the man lifted his gun and began firing at it. He fired a quick string of three shots. I couldn't believe my eyes. Not only had he missed the buck each shot, but what was worse, he was shooting in the direction of several nearby houses. Soon the deer was between me and the hunter. He swung to shoot, but realizing he couldn't without possibly hitting me or Brownie, he brought his gun down. He was clearly outraged. He threw his gun as hard as he could to the ground and began shouting four letter word insults in my direction while his girl friend tried to calm him down. I just continued on, putting as much ground between us as Brownie's calm plodding gait could manage. After seeing this nut at work, I could fully understand how people and livestock are shot every deer hunting season.

Later that day I was going along at my usual pace, down a secondary road, when a Georgia State Trooper passed me slowly and waved to me. I smiled and waved back. He went a short distance ahead of me and stopped with his lights flashing and I stopped behind him figuring he wanted to talk to me. What next, I wondered. Will it be something good or bad?

The officer was a guy about my age. He just wanted to tell me how nice it was to see my outfit. "Is there anything I can do for y'all?" he asked me after introducing himself.

"Oh no, I'm getting along fine," I assured him.

"Well, do you know where you're going to stay tonight?" he asked.

I explained I would probably find a farmer up ahead somewhere that would have some extra ground I could camp on.

"I'm sure you can stay at my parent's farm about five miles south of here. That way I'd know where you'll be so I can come back and visit. I know my parents will be glad to have you over."

"Sounds good to me. I won't make much more than five miles before

this day is used up anyway.”

“I’ll go ahead and tell them y’all are coming,” he told me. Off he went. I went on with spirits high, knowing there’d be no door knocking to try to land a camp spot that night. After awhile the patrolman came back to assure me all was ready. He also asked me how I liked my steak before he went on his way. We’d be having steaks for supper.

It wasn’t long before I was at the highway patrolman’s parent’s place, enjoying all the comforts of home. They seemed certainly in a position to be generous. They had owned a very large farm that was passed down to them through several generations. Recently they’d sub-divided it and sold building lots at top market prices. Now this land was part of the suburbs of Tifton. They had also built a roller skating rink in Tifton which was keeping them busy. I explained my interest in camping at and setting up for tintype portrait business at the nearby Georgia Agrirama site. The Agrirama is a living history farm and village depicting rural life in Georgia in the 1880’s. A few phone quick calls were made and I was informed several staff members from Agrirama would be out to talk to me first thing in the morning.

Sure enough, this was how it happened. Harriett Lawrence, a little woman in her thirties, the head of historical interpretation, and two other staff folks came out. Harriett led the conversation. She’d read about me a month before when the AP story was featured in the Tifton and also the Augusta papers. She’d been hoping I’d come their way. She explained how the Agrirama was just like stepping back a hundred years and I’d fit in perfect there. We talked some more and she gave me directions on how to get there on quiet roads to the back service entrance. It was only a few miles away. She said they’d be watching and waiting for me.

I encouraged my hosts to come to the Agrirama for a free tintype portrait of their family. I had a special piece of baggage as I headed on. My hosts had given me a small owl that had been found hurt and couldn’t fly. I had it in a cardboard box with some fresh hamburger for it to eat. At least I hoped it would eat, and with time gain its strength back. I wanted it to go back to the wild or else if it wanted to, follow along with me.

I arrived at the Agrirama about noon and was given a hearty welcome by Harriett and the other employees. Everything was thought out and arranged for me. I parked the wagon across from the blacksmith shop by the old newspaper office and put Brownie in a large stall in the barn. Next I was invited to lunch at the wood clapboard farm house. It was chicken and dumplings. After we ate Harriett took me to meet the director. I still had to get permission from him to set up for business. I planned to stay for one week.

“Your request is unprecedented,” the director told me. “Never has anyone from the outside been allowed to set up and do business for themselves on these grounds.” Harriett, my undaunted advocate, assured him it would be a good move. With brilliant verbal maneuvering, she soon had him agreeing to the whole thing as if it were his brain child. Quickly he was saying how none of the rules on the books applied to my situation and what I was doing and just think of all the free publicity I would bring in for the institution.

## Visiting Agrirama

# Photographer Leaves Home For Journey on 'What's It'

By HERB BENSON  
Gazette Staff Writer

Four months ago, 26-year-old John Coffey had two cars, a van, a condominium in Florida and a prosperous career as a studio photographer.

Since then he has exchanged these for a horse called Brownie, a "what's-it" wagon, and a sense of fulfillment.

Coffey left Lancaster County, Pa., during the first week of August with only his horse and wagon, some clothes and photographic equipment in order to fulfill a "fantasy about what life would be like for a photographer in the late 1800s."

"I began to seriously consider this trip during the spring," Coffey recalls. "I had two cars, money in the bank and a condominium, but I just didn't like what I was doing. I got rid of everything, except for some personal things I put in storage, and took off."

Since "taking off," Coffey has traveled 1,300 miles, earning his living making tintypes. Tintypes are a type of photograph in which the image is placed on a piece of metal, instead of paper, without the use of a negative. Coffey arrived in Tifton Friday and is planning to stay for the week, making tintypes at the Georgia Agrirama.

"I ran a tintype shop in North Carolina and one in Florida," Coffey points out, "but, I wasn't doing things as authentically as I wanted. The photographers of the 1800s didn't sit around in studios waiting for customers to come in. They had to go out and get their pictures. That's what I wanted to do."

Coffey, a confessed history buff, bought a horse and wagon in Pennsylvania, added a top to the wagon to resemble the photographers' wagons of the era and began his trek with the same type of camera used during the period.

"They called a wagon like this a 'what's it' wagon," said Coffey. "Matthew Brady (a noted 19th century



John Coffey (right) discusses the similarities between the original tintypes and the ones he makes with Sadie Brogdon, an employee of the Georgia Agrirama. Coffey will be making tintype prints at the Agrirama through Sunday for anyone wishing to purchase them. (Gazette Photo)

photographer) traveled in one just like it and no one knew exactly what to call it. So, they just called it a 'what's it' wagon. I do everything just like it was done originally. The entire process takes about 15 to 20 minutes once I get set up."

Although travel is slow and Coffey

has to sleep outside when he cannot find a family who will invite him to stay with them ("I never ask people to let me stay," he hastily adds. "Most of them just invite me"), the worst problem he has is with receiving his mail. "Everything else has been pretty smooth," he notes.

That night the architectural restoration on site expert and his wife who also worked at the Agrirama had me to their home for dinner. The next day I spent just looking over the museum.

What I had been told was true. Agrirama was like going back to the 1880's in rural Georgia. They had about fifteen historic buildings that had been moved in from the surrounding area. Some of the more outstanding ones were the building that housed the steam engine powered cotton gin and press, the water run grist mill and the newspaper office. The gristmill and newspaper office were in daily operation. There were a lot of other historic and interesting activities going on as well.

By the farm house were a couple old black men making cane syrup. Another black man drove a mule hitched to a one horse farm wagon around the grounds. He hauled sugar cane, or anything that needed to be brought in or out of the historic area. He also gave rides to the visitors. I liked the Agrirama rule that no motor vehicles of any sort were allowed on the grounds. The roads had nothing but the marks of mule hoofs and wagon wheel steel tire marks pressed into the packed red clay. If the horses and mules made manure it was left to lie on the road. Of course one of the bonneted ladies at the farmstead might decide to go out with the old wooden wheelbarrow and shovel and scoop it up for garden compost.

The morale amongst the employees seemed to be very high. There was a lot of interest in authenticity and the old ways of doing everything. An elderly lady starting a fire in the fireplace of a log cabin told me what fat lighter wood was. She said, "Georgia folks call the pine wood that has a lot of resin saturating it, fat lighter."

I learned something about what kids did for excitement a century ago too. One old man splitting firewood by another cabin told me, "Kids used to put a little water on the end of a sawed off stump, drop a few white hot coals from the fireplace unto it and smack this with the back side of an ax or a sledge hammer. It would explode and sound like a stick of dynamite had gone off."

The main farm house was called a dog trot house. It was like two houses really, sharing a common roof, with an open breezeway going between the two. I guessed the breezeway was the dog trot or at least where they liked to lie around on a hot sunny day. But more practically this design came about because in the warmer times of the year people wanted the heat of the cook stove or cooking fireplace to be away from the part of the house they slept in.

I ate a hearty lunch at the farm house nearly every day, free of charge.



A couple ladies wearing the clothes of the period would prepare the noon meals for staff and food for visitors to sample. The long plain pine wood table was piled high with gingerbread, rhubarb pie, fried chicken and other delicious things all prepared on the old wood fired range.

The blacksmith had been at the museum only a couple of years. He'd moved to the area from California. Already he'd totally restored one of the farm wagons they used and was busy with many more projects that required historically authentic work. But, he hadn't learned how to shoe horses yet and I needed to get Brownie reshod. He called a local horse shoer to come out. This time around Brownie was extra uncooperative. He refused to hold still when his rear hoofs were being worked on. He even reared back dangerously a couple of times. To put a stop to that, the ferrier brought out his twitch and showed me how to apply it.

A twitch is a round stick about as thick as a broom handle with a loop of cotton braided rope on one end. We placed the end of Brownie's upper lip through the loop and then tightened down on it by twisting the stick. This created considerable discomfort to Brownie's lip which took his mind off what was happening to his rear hoofs with the shoeing. It worked like a charm and as soon as the twitch was released and taken off his big rubbery lip, he was none the worse for ware. The young horse shoer only charged me \$17. He gave me at least \$17 worth of Borium to make sure I'd not be caught short of that if I hired other shoers who might not have it. In effect he made no profit on me at all except for the experience. After he was done he admitted that Brownie was the first heavy work horse he'd ever shod.

The newspaper office was next door to my camp. The newspaper man printed his monthly paper using the old letter press printing presses of the period. The stories he printed were taken from old 1880's Georgia papers. Also there were stories about the current events there at the Agrirama, like the one about the traveling Tintype portrait photographer who had just arrived to do business for a limited period of time. The newspaper office also published a few books on folklore. Done all the old way, they were very authentic looking. The printer was nice enough to leave the back room of the newspaper office open for me at night. It had gotten extra cold at night. The room was heated and had bathroom facilities.

Summer is peak time for tourists, so it was definitely the off-season. Groups of school children on field trips came by most of the week. They were poor prospects for my tintype portrait business. I did speak to many of the groups, telling them about the life of the 1880's itinerant photographer. Eventually, some interesting customers did come my way. Georgia State Troopers, friends of the one who had been so helpful and generous a few

days before, showed up one day. They wanted a tintype made and to pose just as they were, in their state trooper uniforms. I took this as a compliment. It wasn't about dressing up in old time clothes, like what motivated most of my customers, but rather it was about getting a genuine tintype made. When we were done they got back into their squad cars, which I could see through the trees.

"Time to get back out on 95 and catch some more Yankee speeders," one told me as he strode off.

I shot back an enthusiastic, "Gittum!"

I also had Richard Burton come for his portrait. This man wasn't the actor. He was a Boy Scout leader. Richard was my age, blonde and blue eyed. His troop, however, was entirely black. The boys seemed to be very fond of their leader and were a very well behaved and obedient bunch. Richard had a couple of tintypes made of himself with two of the scouts. Dressed in the top hat and fancy tails, he looked like he was a Southern aristocrat and the two boys were his personal servants. The boys were ecstatic about the tintypes.

"Hey, we look cool!" they shouted out.

By the weekend the weather had warmed up, bringing a good many visitors to the museum. I did a brisk business, to the tune of about \$250 worth. But, most of my business during my stay was with the museum staff, their friends and families.



I shot only two glass negatives for myself while I was at Agrirama. One was of the blacksmith. I posed him by the tools of his trade near the big anvil inside his shop. The other one was of an elderly lady spinning cotton on a large spinning wheel. I had found her at work in one of the log cabins one quiet day. Her hands skillfully pulled and twisted the ball of cotton hanging from the spinning wheel into thread. The spinning wheel made a faint

whirling sound, and the fire in the nearby fireplace crackled. The sunlight streaming through a window illuminated her softly as she worked. It was a serene and magical scene. I felt I had to capture it.



My time at Agrirama was very special. I met and shared with all kinds of interesting people. The only misfortune to befall me there was that my little adopted owl had died. I buried him beneath a tree in the dense woods just beyond the water run gristmill.

Despite the pleas of the staff to stay another day or two, I decided to head out after being there a week, as planned. It was a frosty morning as I loaded up the wagon and got Brownie harnessed up. Harriett had come in extra early to see me off. As I sat on the wagon seat ready to roll, she handed me a basket of cookies and home canned goods. She also handed me a large brown envelope that said for: Mr. Coffey on the outside. She explained that it was a letter of recommendation from the museum director. I thought that was sure nice of him, but I didn't realize just how valuable such a document would be to me until many more miles on in my journey. Another thing I didn't realize at the time that would become even more valuable and useful to me in my life's journey was a peculiar looking tool shown to me by the museum director on the first day I had arrived at the Agrirama. He asked me if I knew what this oddly carved piece of wood with two cords off each end with metal hooks attached to the cords was. I had no idea. He informed me it was a human yoke or also called a shoulder yoke. You wore it upon your shoulders and against the back of your neck. It had cords with an iron hook dangling from each end, at arms length. It made it far easier to carry two buckets of water or anything in buckets great distances, allowing your shoulders to help carry the load rather than just your arms. I immediately could see the value in such a tool and decided someday I would make one for myself to use.

Brownie had spent most of the week in a stall in the barn and was raring to go. Giving him his head and a gitup he took off at a fast trot down the red clay street. The old mule brayed at us from his post on the cane crusher mill and the 1880's people waved as we re-entered the 1970's.

Kim Monk, an employee at the Agrirama's newspaper and print shop, had given me directions to her and her family's place fifteen miles south. On the way to the Monk's near Omega, I passed an old barn made out of logs in the dogtrot style. I almost stopped to shoot a plate with my camera but decided to press on. It was a little too dead and forlorn looking. I suppose if there had been somebody hitching up a team of mules in the breezeway or up on the roof nailing on new wooden shakes, I'd have stopped for sure.

Kim Monk and her husband lived down a long wooded lane off the county road. When I got there nobody was home but I knew I was welcome, so I went ahead and parked the wagon in a shady spot away from the house. After I'd unharnessed Brownie, I let him loose. In his usual way, he looked around for a good soft dusty spot, head held low, smelling the ground and

snorting a little as he walked. I'd heard that when a horse rolls it reenergizes itself. Brownie soon found a spot that suited him near an old iron rail fence like what you would see going around a fancy old grave yard. He dropped to his knees and then flopped over onto his side. He wiggled and itched himself on that side a little and with a burst of effort and a grunt he turned over onto his back and then tried to roll onto his other side but the fence was there. I heard a loud Wang! as Brownie whacked his head and body into the solid iron fence. He lay there motionless. He was square on his back like a big dog asking for a belly rub. The thought that he might have knocked himself out raced through my mind. In a panic, I ran over to him and shouted, "Get up!" I shouted this a few more times and there was no reaction. He just lay there with his eyes half closed. Now I was really scared. I knelt down by his head and shouted, "Get up Brownie!" After what seemed to be an eternity, he opened his eyes wide, stirred a little and rolled away from the fence and got back up on his feet. Thank God he's alright, I thought. I rubbed his head, feeling for any injuries or lumps, of which there were none. I laughed and called him a big bubble brain.

Usually when Brownie rolled, he would go all the way over before getting to his feet. This time the fence had got in his way. He hadn't really knocked himself out. It had just taken him a little while to figure out his predicament and roll back the way he had come. I'd heard a piece of folk lore that a horse is worth a hundred dollars for each time he rolls over. Brownie rarely rolls more than three times in one bout. This time I guess he was worth only fifty bucks.

Soon after five the Monks arrived home. We put Brownie in the pasture with their riding horse. I had a fine dinner and pleasant evening sharing stories with the Monks, especially the one about Brownie nearly knocking himself out on their iron fence. The next day was a warm enjoyable one on quiet back roads. I passed farms of every size. A good many had beef cattle. Some of the pine woods were planted in neat rows like corn in a field. Pecan groves were plentiful too. The natural woodlands contained pine, live oak, magnolia, and palmetto trees. Palmetto is a small palm tree that grows as a dense undergrowth about waist high. It has a small wide frond. The lacy gray cords of Spanish Moss draped off most of the tall trees.

By quitting time I was near Berlin, Georgia. I got on busy Highway 33 and put Brownie into a trot to get as quickly as we could to a farm I could see up ahead. Brownie spooked at a cardboard box near the side of the road and swerved far out into the lanes of traffic. Fortunately, there were no cars coming or going near us or I might have been hit. I chided myself for being in too big a hurry and drove Brownie the rest of the way at a walk.

When I reached the farm I noticed the farmer out side the barn working on his tractor. I asked about a possible spot on his place I could camp on over night. He just stood there smiling back at me. His nine year old son who was with him began to use sign language to translate more or less what I had just said. The boy told me his father was deaf. The farmer produced a pen and small note pad from his bib-overall pocket and asked me a few questions by writing them down. Soon I was all set for a spot for the night on his farm. Later after I was settled in, they asked me if I'd like to attend the Berlin Grade School Christmas Play. I told them I'd be delighted. Heck, there might even be some cookies and other goodies to partake of afterwards.

The auditorium was filled with adults and buzzing with excitement. The play soon started and the little children's voices trembled and stumbled through each skit, song and recitation. Many times only a murmur could be heard from a frightened child on the stage. If a child forgot their lines, a parent would prompt them from the audience. A hearty round of applause rose from the adoring audience after each performance, no matter how bad it was. Politely, I smiled and clapped along with the proud parents. Little angels danced around with aluminum foil halos and gauze and glitter covered cardboard wings. The cotton gauze also found its way on the faces of eight year old bearded wise men. Some tripped over their long robes made of old bed spreads as they came and went from the stage. All of the singing was slightly off key. My host's deafness may have been a blessing for him in this instance. The farmer also didn't have to hear all the gossiping going on among the people around us. I'd hear, "Is that Billy Joe's ex over there?" "Did you see who her brother is taking up with since his divorce? There up in the back row, fifth seat over." It was clear to hear and see that the Christmas play was bringing families together. But I never would have guessed how many daddies were on one side of the auditorium and moms were on the other with different partners. After the play was over I enjoyed the cookies and refreshments that were there for the taking.

Back at my camp that night I looked out at the stars. Somehow I felt a bit more fulfilled for having experienced something as corny as a Christmas play in rural Georgia.

The next day the deaf farmer gave me a burlap bag full of nice dry ear corn from his old wooden slatted corn crib. I knew Brownie would love it. I thanked him and went on my way toward Quitman. A few miles before getting there I was stopped by some friendly older folks in front of their modest house. They had a field with lots of tall grass behind the house and I was invited to camp there if I liked. In fact they said I could stay there an extra day and give my horse a nice rest. It was supposed to rain the next day



too. I decided to take my hosts up on the offer.

My host informed me that he had a brother who wanted to meet me. His name was Bob Cob. He soon came by to visit.

“I’ve done what you are doing,” he told me, “cept my wagon was pulled by a single ox. I drove the ox hitched to a cover wagon all the way from Silver Springs, Florida to the 1939 World’s Fair in New York and then back again. I did portraits using a tintype camera of people sitting on the back of the ox or standing by the wagon.”

I wanted to see some of his pictures and find out more about his adventure. So he invited me to make camp at his house the next night. He lived south of Quitman just over the border into Florida. Bob told me he was the resident foreman for a cattle ranch so there’d be plenty of room and feed for Brownie. Bob, after giving me thorough directions to his place, went home.

That night I ate supper with my host and his wife. He told me, “If you hear sleigh bells tonight don’t worry. It won’t really be Santa Clause. It’ll just be me bringing presents over to our grandchildren’s house next door.”

Sure enough, I was getting under the covers in the wagon, ready to get some shut eye, when I heard a small engine start up and then the ringing of sleigh bells. I looked out the back flap and could see what was going on clearly by the light of the flood light near the house. My host was riding his lawn mower down the edge of the road, shaking an old leather string of sleigh bells as he went. I heard him shouting, “Ho, ho, ho!” as he neared his grandchildren’s house.

The next morning I headed out at the crack of dawn. I had two things to be excited about. I’d be crossing over into the great state of Florida, a place I’d been telling everyone for months I was bound for. And I’d be learning more about a fellow wagon traveler, Bob Cob. I stopped at the Quitman grocery store to get a few things. I brought my groceries out in a shopping cart like everyone did, but my van had only one horse out in front instead of a hundred. This was fine with me, of course. But when I reached Bob’s at the end of the day he let me know his opinion on horse power. He didn’t think it was the right choice.

I hadn’t been at his place long when he told me I ought to ditch Brownie and get an ox to pull my wagon. I told him Brownie was slow enough and that sometimes I thought he was an ox posing as a horse. I then asked Bob where would anyone find an ox anyway?

Bob was surprised by my question. “You mean to tell me you came all the way from Pennsylvania in a wagon and no one ever told you what an ox was?”

Bob must have thought information on oxen was wide spread in the countryside. He went on to tell me, "An ox is nothing more than a trained steer."

Luckily I had learned what makes cattle steers so I didn't have to ask about that.

"I know what a steer is," I told Bob. "But can any breed of cattle be oxen if they are trained to work?"

"Yes sir, that's right. I've got a year old Holstein over in the corral I want to show you. I've got him trained to pull a cart. I drive him while my daughter and I ride in the cart by just using 'gee' {go right} and haw {go left}. Can you do that with your horse?"

I admitted I probably couldn't but wasn't convinced about the superiority of an ox. It was hard to picture a black and white Holstein steer pulling the Photographic Van. We went over to the corral that had the ox in it. Bob called, "Git down here Pat!" The black and white steer came over to us. He was certainly a beautiful strong looking animal. I noticed a copper ring in his nose and asked Bob about it.

"That way I have all the control I want when I need it. I put rings in my oxen's noses and also in my bull's noses."

Bob showed me the single ox yoke he used on Pat. He'd carved it out of a curved piece of pine. The bow in the yoke that came up from the bottom and through two holes in the yoke was made from a thick piece of wild vine. Chains ran off of either side of the yoke for pulling traces. Bob pointed out how simple and cheap the whole affair was. I had to agree.

Bob had worked and trained several single oxen in his day. But his most memorable was the one who'd pulled a covered wagon to the 1939 New York World's Fair and back again to Florida.

"I'd been cowboying in the Florida swamps when I got the idea," Bob told me. "It was a promotional stunt for the already famous tourist attraction, Silver Springs. I took a wild Florida Cracker steer that was already several years old. Now that was a big job getting him trained to work! The wagon he pulled was a replica of a Conestoga Wagon. It took us about three months to get to New York."

"How'd you make a living?" I asked him.

"Silver Springs sponsored me. I had their banner tied to the side of the wagons top."

I told Bob I'd never been sponsored by anyone.

"Good for you," he said enthusiastically. "You can do what ever you want and go wherever you want. On the way back south I wasn't working for those Silver Springs turkeys anymore and made more money on my own. I

sold picture postcards of the outfit and took 'black backs' of people sitting on the back of the ox."

It was certainly true about people sitting on the back of his ox. He showed me a picture taken at the World's Fair of Larry of the famous Three Stooges hamming it up astride the ox.

I asked about the 'black back' photos he took. He explained that they were a later day type of dry plate tintype that came on the scene in the 1920's. Instead of a tin plate they were on a hard thick glossy black paper. He used an early 1900's dry plate tintype 'street camera' to expose and process the 'black backs'.

"How did you shoe your ox?" I asked.

"I used a rope around it and threw it down on its side. Oxen have a specially shaped shoe on each half of their foot."

It was interesting to know it could be done although I knew there had to be quite a bit more to the job and more so then shoeing a horse.

I ate supper with Bob, his wife, and their teenage daughter. Bob had met his wife in the forties when he had just started up a traveling rodeo show. She was twenty years his junior. She was only fifteen and already an accomplished bareback stunt rider. Her father was an Italian from the old country and refused to let her travel with Bob and the rodeo show until he married her. So this is what they did, even though they'd known each other only a week. Bob showed me a picture from the show days of her riding on top two running horses. She stood with one foot on each horse's back 'Roman Style' as they jumped over a barricade.

Bob also showed me another photo of a well trained young Brahma bull jumping through a flaming hoop. "Brahmas are the smartest cattle of all," he informed me.

It was interesting to hear also that he never charged admission to his show.

"We took up a collection by passing a couple cowboy hats through the audience. We made plenty enough money that way."

Bob and I stayed up late talking. Bob did most of the talking, actually. He even went so far as to tell me how he had in his youth, while rambling around, killed a guy for loud snoring. He clubbed him, which stopped the snoring. Upon discovering in the morning the fix had been a little bit too permanent, he lit out and never was brought to justice. He said he always felt bad about what he'd done. Finally I decided it was time for me to get some sleep before I nodded off and started, God forbid, snoring! I was surprised to hear Bob tell me, "If I knew you better you could sleep in the house."

The wagon was like home to me and suited me lots better anyway. As I

walked to the wagon which was parked by the horse barn, the frozen frost covered grass gleamed in the moon and star light. It crackled under my feet with each step. I looked for Brownie. I could see his silhouette out in the cow pasture. Even though I covered myself with all I had for blankets, I didn't really keep me as warm as I thought I'd be in Florida. I would need more blankets. When morning finally came around I peaked out of the back flap of the wagon upon a frosty white landscape. The wooden bucket by the rear wagon wheel had a layer of ice on the water in it.

I ate breakfast with the Cob's. The sun shown brightly through the clear blue sky. Looking out the bay window of the dining area, I enjoyed watching the frost melt off the landscape. I also noticed a large herd of big white cattle in the pasture.

"Those sure are some nice looking cows" I told Bob. "What kind are they?"

"Oh, those are Charolais. They are several years old. The Boss don't sell them or eat any of them. He has them just for looking at. The Boss is a multi-millionaire."

A lane ran by Bob's house, which was the care takers house, up to a huge new mansion built on a rise.

"Did you notice there ain't any curtains up in the mansion?" Bob asked me.

As a matter of fact I had thought it peculiar.

"He's got to be able to see everything, who's coming and going. Only one bedroom has curtains and that's his wife's."

I wondered if the glass in the windows was also bullet proof.

"This spread is a thousand acres," Bob continued. "The Boss only comes here a couple times a year. This is only one of several places he owns."

The sun had melted off most of the frost by the time I was ready to head out. Frost remained only in the shade of the barn and other buildings. Bob's wife had given me a bag of produce and left over pork chops from last night's delicious supper. She wished me good travels. Bob gave me a hardy cowboy handshake and wished me good luck.

I guided Brownie at a ginger step down the estate's long private road to the county blacktop. As I went I reflected on Bob's enthusiasm for oxen. I decided that someday I would give oxen a try. But, I'd have me a pair.

I almost had to remind myself I was traveling in Florida now. The landscape still looked like Georgia. It was amazing that I had at last made my destination. The cocky Amish boy in now far away Intercourse was no doubt still speeding in his buggy up and down the main drag. He was still there.

The 'tortoise' was in Florida. But now that I was in the sunshine state, the distance and time it took really didn't seem all that much. In fact, it had taken four months and well over a thousand miles. This new life had changed my sense of time and distance dramatically. Where to go from here and how long it would take wasn't anything that pressed on my mind. I'd long since ditched my alarm clock. Half of the while my pocket watch wasn't ticking and needed winding. I took each day as it came. Where the sun was at the moment and what the weather was were more important considerations than time and distance.

That evening I camped in a big cow pasture just outside of Madison. The people that owned the land were transplants from the North. Why had they chosen this part of Florida? They told me they'd shopped for a place in the more popular southern end of the state but real estate was much cheaper in northern Florida and life in general was a lot less hectic. They knew other Yankees that had moved into their area recently. We talked about the Sunbelt being the new center for manufacturing. They hoped it wouldn't be.

It was getting dark and time for me to settle in for the night. I thanked my hosts for the camp spot and after fixing myself a simple supper, I rolled out the bed roll on the wagon box floor and quickly drifted off to sleep for the night.

In the morning I was awakened by the loud sounds of heavy rain driven by gusty winds drumming on the wagons top and sides. The thunder and lightning were crashing and booming as if it were only a stone's throw away. Thankfully the inside of the wagon was dry and cozy, so I decided to just stay put under the covers and wait it out. But the rain kept up for a couple hours and at times came down in such quantities it sounded like the wagon was parked under a waterfall. Peeking out the back flap I couldn't see ten feet through the deluge of rain. I was worried about Brownie. Wherever he was, I hoped he was alright.

Eventually the rain began to let up. I could now hear a faint gnawing sound coming from somewhere in the wagon. I traced it to the feed bag under my pillow. I pulled the pillow and feed bag back and a mouse darted to the other end of the wagon bed. I soon chased it out of the wagon where it darted under the camera box, under my tarp just outside. I grabbed the handle of the box and gave it a yank, squashing the mouse. I kind of felt bad for having killed it, but I sure didn't need any mouse hitchhikers in my wagon.

Half way into the morning the rain stopped. I did a quick survey of the pasture and there was Brownie happily grazing between great pools of standing water along with the cows. I took the canvas tarp off my boxes

behind the wagon. Everything was still dry. I spread it out on the ground to dry out in the sun. I straightened up the blankets in my bedroll and rolled it up in the wagon, cinching it up with two heavy straps. Then I went and had a chat with my host. He said I could stay put if I wanted to and leave the next day.

By afternoon the clouds gave way to blue sky and bright sunshine. I washed some clothes in the wooden bucket on my little scrub board. Then I went out in the pasture to play tag with Brownie. I'd run as fast as I could by him, shouting, "Get up Brownie! Hey! Hey!" He'd turn and run with me a ways and then I'd turn and run in the opposite direction and stop. Brownie would spin around and then run full blast straight at me, farting and bucking as he came. At the last few yards he'd veer past me, prancing, waving his head proudly from side to side, then he would turn and give me a defiant look as he blew loudly through his nostrils as if he were a great stallion. Sometimes I would go up to his Highness, squat down and jump suddenly in the air. Brownie would squeal and spring high into the air as well. We had a great time, just the two of us.

After the fun and games, Brownie peacefully went back to grazing, while I put up a make shift clothes line and was hanging my washed and rinsed clothes out to dry. A man and his young son who lived just down from my host's house came to visit. They soon invited me to supper at their place and also offered me the use of their clothes dryer. I quickly gathered up my wet clothes and headed across the pasture.

As we walked, the man informed me that it was Christmas Eve. It took me by surprise. Somehow I'd lost track of the days. Actually, it came as a disappointment. I had hoped to get a bag of horse feed in town the next day. Obviously all the stores in town would be closed.

When I entered my new friend's house, arms laden with with dripping clothes, the lady of the house greeted me warmly.

"We're happy to have you," she said, and quickly snatched the wet clothes away to be put in the dryer.

After supper I mentioned that all I wanted for Christmas was a bag of horse feed for Brownie. My new friends weren't farm folks so I knew there was nothing they could do to help me. Or so I thought. Then out of the blue, their friend, the local farm supply store manager dropped by for a visit. My friends told him about my trip and my need of a bag of horse feed. Soon we were in the manager's pick-up, on our way to his store. The manager opened the place just for me and I bought a 50 pound bag of sweet feed.

I headed out bright and early the next morning on a bright and beautiful Christmas Day. It seemed like I was the only one in the world out

and about. The lack of traffic didn't hurt my feelings. I was my kind of 'peace on earth'.

A few miles east of Madison a little stop-and-go gas station convenience store was open. I stopped to get a few necessities, like TP, milk, and bread. A young black man came into the store and asked the woman behind the counter how she was doing.

"As good as anybody'd feel, having to work on Christmas," she responded grimly.

As she was ringing up my groceries she asked me, "Where y'all going?"

"White Springs," I replied. I felt a little strange not being able to just click off the usual 'Florida' any more.

"You're going to White Springs? . . . In that?" She made a motion with her thumb towards Brownie and the wagon outside. "Why, that's fifty miles from here!" She was aghast.

"What's fifty miles. I just came down from Pennsylvania with that horse and wagon."

The black man who'd just bought ten dollars worth of gas chipped in. "Yeah and I bet you passed every gas station between Pennsylvania and here too. I read about you in the Augusta paper not long ago."

After hearing the man's testimony the clerk lady had to believe my story. But there was still a look in her eye like maybe the guy and I had been colluding.

At about noontime I stopped at a fancy new split level house to get a bucket of water. It had gotten downright warm and Brownie was working up a sweat. I asked permission to get water from their outside hydrant, suddenly a whole pile of people came out of the house to check us out. It was a real Christmas family reunion. Several generations gathered themselves in rapt curiosity around the wagon. Clearly things had gotten, by this time of Christmas Day, a little boring inside the house. I had arrived like a savior. In the midst of all the smiles and delight and friendly conversation, a heaping plate of turkey and all the trimmings was passed up to me as I sat holding court from the wagon seat. Next, a plate with a couple big slices of pumpkin pie was forced on me. Brownie wasn't doing too badly himself, either. A beautiful college aged girl was giving him apples and carrots along with hugs and kisses in between. I enjoyed my pie but would have gladly traded it for what Brownie was getting. When I was done I thanked the nice family and bid them farewell. Many Merry Christmases were called out as I waved and headed on my way.

At quitting time I made camp at a small farm. Here I was treated to

another Christmas feast of leftovers. It was amazing. I'd done nothing to prepare for Christmas and was prepared to let it slide by like any other day of the year. My only nearest family, my sister and my mother, were far away in Southern California. But, I'd been welcomed like family by so many kind people that day. It was almost hard to miss my mom and sister and memories of any Christmases past. The Christmas of '78 was one of the nicest I'd ever experienced...

Stay put on that wagon seat pardners  
for the further wagon traveling adventures of John and  
Brownie as they crisscross their way across the continent.