

Chapter Eight

Look Out for Gypsies

As I traveled south into North Carolina, several cities formed a wide horizontal belt of high speed traffic in my path. Once again, I had to be my own Civil War general as I looked at my maps and contemplated various routes to skirt the enemy's main force and outflank them. Automobile traffic was and still is almost as obnoxious as incoming artillery fire. I also gleaned what information I could from the friendly local folks along the way. I decided to take the path of least resistance between Greensboro and Burlington. It turned out to be a battle won.

I avoided a lot of traffic but at quitting time things did not look so good as far as finding a place to bivouac. I pushed on later in the day than I liked to, but had to get away from the suburbs where it would be nearly impossible to find a place to camp. I came by a neatly laid out place with a double wide trailer and a big horse barn that looked like a good possibility, although there didn't seem to be any horses around. The wood fenced pastures had green grass growing lushly in them. Beyond were large circular corrals, probably used for training horses. Everything looked great as far as a place to camp for the night, but no one seemed to be at home

Across the road was an even neater place with a new ranch style house that had a large cattle pasture next to it. I decided to check it out. As I pulled up the drive I saw a couple of acres fenced off out back of the house. In that area were tall metal sheds filled with several old steam traction engines, a thrashing machine and an assortment of other antique farming equipment. It was surrounded by a high chain link fence with very forbidding looking angled out strands of barbed wire on top, like a prison might have around it. As unwelcoming as that looked, I had a sense of relief and thought, surely people with such a reverence for old time things would allow me to camp on their land somewhere and would surely have an appreciation for what I was doing to keep the old ways alive. A teenage boy responded to my knock on the front door. He said I'd have to talk to his father about a place to camp on their property, and his dad would be home soon. So I waited, and then I waited some more. Finally the landowner pulled up. He looked every bit the business executive.

Without saying a word or appearing to notice me in any way, he strode to the door of the house and disappeared. I waited some more. I didn't relish the idea of going to the house and knocking again. When the man reappeared, he was dressed in work clothes. Finally he acknowledged my presence. I briefly explained my story and situation and he began to smile.

He said, "I've got cattle in the pasture and you can't camp on my property any

where.”

I was crushed, but out of curiosity I asked, “Are all those old steam tractors owned by a club?” That was how it had been at the steam show in Kinzer, Pennsylvania where I had camped and did Tintype business.

Quite proudly the man exclaimed, “No, they’re all mine. I have a dozen steam engines and a lot of other old farm stuff in there.”

He had no ideas about where I might get permission to camp on down the road, either. I thanked him and shoved off. It was dusk. I continued on a way, but didn’t come onto anything but a big mobile home park. I knew this wouldn’t do, but Brownie kept trying to turn into the driveway. He knew very well it was past quitting time. He didn’t understand that he wouldn’t be welcome to graze on the postage stamp size, well trimmed lawns by each trailer house. Down the road, around the next bend, could be the ideal spot with friendly welcoming people, but I had an overpowering feeling there wasn’t. I decided to turn back and wait it out, come what may, at the horse barn place.

No one was home yet. I thought I’d just stand with Brownie and wait. We watched the sun set and still no one came. Brownie was getting quite impatient, tossing his head in frustration as the tall green grass beckoned unto him. In his mind, grass is to be eaten and not just gawked at, especially at this time of day. A horse isn’t like a car which can be shut off and parked until you need it to go again. I decided I’d better attend to Brownie’s needs. I unhitched him, took his harness off, and put him in one of the grassy paddocks. Then I found him some fresh water from a nearby water hydrant. By now it was quite dark and the night air was cooling down rapidly. I went back to the wagon and anxiously waited.

A car pulled in. The people got out and went into the horse barn, hardly looking my way. I waited awhile longer and then I went to the barn. It turned out these people weren’t the owners. One of them, a girl in her mid-teens, told me she didn’t think the owner, Sherry, would mind me camping overnight. I was still rather uncomfortable about my situation but could only tough it out at this point and hope for the best. The people I was talking with were two teenage girls who owned a couple of show horses and stabled them with Sherry. They were escorted and chauffeured by one of the girl’s parents.

The barn was filled with high class show horses. I noticed how their coats were very short and velvety. The girls told me how much grooming they did. They used electric clippers to shave the manes, forelock, fetlocks, and whiskers off. Some of the horses had their tails bound up in bandages. These were Tennessee Walkers. They have their tail bones broken and then reset so it heals in more of an arch shape.

Of course I had a different idea about what horses were for. This all seemed quite unnatural, as did the temperature in the barn. It was heated so that the horses wouldn’t grow a long winter coat. I thought of Brownie outside in the cold, quite contented, looking not at all like an expensive show horse, but rather like a big brown teddy bear. His winter coat was coming in on schedule. I went back outside to check on him. He

was busy grazing away on the lush green grass. At least to me, Brownie had the better deal.

When I could wait no longer and it was bedtime, I decided to sack out in the usual way in the wagon. I half expected the owner to wake me up in the middle of the night and tell me to get the heck off the property. But in the morning Sherry was home and turned out to be pleasant enough, and unconcerned about my presence.

I was in the very heart of North Carolina now. It was rolling hill country, sprinkled with small farms and woodlands. I traveled on the back roads which wound their way past the occasional farm or home. Some places were well kept. Others looked like junk yards with stripped cars, broken down tractors and a shanty of a house. There weren't many barns of any size other than tobacco barns. I speculated that this was due to the milder climate and also because the people weren't as affluent as those farther north.

I'd been through two frosts so far. It was near the end of October. I was beginning to feel more of an urgency to get further south. I decided to just keep traveling and not worry about finding any picture making business locations for awhile. From the way the average local seemed to be, I didn't think I would do a whole lot of business anyway. The locals were a bit distant and not so interested in what I was up to. Not one newspaper in the state of North Carolina had interviewed me yet. In Virginia I had been interviewed by small town and even some big town newspapers nearly every day and sometimes twice in a day.

I had to think that maybe these people were more backwoods and suspicious of strangers. As always, being a wagon traveler put me in a curious position. If I was on foot, backpacking my way around the country, I could have gone almost totally incognito. After dark all one would have to do was step off into some secluded woods to make camp for the night and no one would likely notice. I presented a much larger profile and had to get permission to park on someone's land. I had to meet people and find out what was on their minds, whether I wanted to or not. It was all part of the nature of what I was doing.

One evening, not far from Asheboro, I found an agreeable camp spot on a farm. The owner was a middle aged guy who was as hospitable as I could have hoped for. He'd grown up on this farm but leased most of it out. He made his living as the owner of a garment assembly plant. The words 'sweat shop' came to mind, but of course I kept that to myself. Howard lived in a big new ranch style house across the road from the old two story farm house where he'd grown up. It was now occupied by his elderly widowed mother. He thought I should go meet his mom, as it was her birthday. She had clear recollections of the horse and buggy days and Howard thought she might enjoy telling me about them. We soon went into the house. Mother was in her rocker in the living room, surrounded by friends and relatives sitting on the well worn furniture around her. Howard introduced me to everyone. Then he asked, "John, guess how old mother is?"

"I have no idea," I said.

Howard proudly announced, "She's a young 80 years old today." Then, walking over to her and leaning down close to her ear he shouted, "Mom, this here man is traveling the country in a horse drawn wagon."

With a concerned look she glanced up at my unshaven face and dusty well worn clothes. She looked at her son with a worried expression, then back at me and said, "Is you a jip?"

I didn't know what she meant at first. I said, "Am I a jip? No, I'm not Japanese."

"No, no, I mean, are you a jip?" she shot back.

"Well no, I guess I'm not," I said, still not knowing what she was talking about.

Howard said, "He does tintage pictures for a living as he travels, Mother."

Old mom replied, "I remember when I was a girl the jips used to come through in their wagons. We'd have to really keep an eye on our pocketbooks. Nearly every time they came along someone's pocketbook would disappear. Chickens too! They used to do them tintypes and they'd fade out black a week after you got them."

"Oh," I said, "You're talking about the gypsies. I'm not a gypsy. And my tintypes don't fade out either. Maybe the gypsies didn't process their plates correctly in an effort to save time and make more money." This sailed over her head. Howard's mother had me pegged.

Howard had some more things to show me. He took me on quite a tour, which included a trip to his business in Asheboro. He operated a garment assembly factory. There were rows and rows of sewing machines where women sewed all day. After this, we went out to dinner and then back to his house. Next door to it was a building that housed yet another money making enterprise that he and his wife had going. It was a nice little shop where they sold ceramics. He and his wife would mold the pieces and then fire them in a kiln. This was what they called 'greenware'. Howard's wife gave classes to local ladies on how to paint the greenware. Next, Howard fired the lavishly painted pieces once again.

There were a couple of ladies in a back room painting molded Christmas wreaths as we passed through. They told me they were getting ready for Christmas early. Howard proudly showed me some of the things the customers had finished recently. One was a bust of Elvis. Another was an owl.

"Owls are big," Howard informed me. "Mushrooms too."

He went on to tell me what a booming business he was doing with ceramics. I was a little amazed because they were located on a very remote back road. I looked up and noticed a cutesy looking raccoon sitting on a big mushroom holding a shiny ear of corn to its mouth. There was a sappy quality to most of the work. I decided I'd better leave before I told Howard what I really thought of the handiwork.

The next morning after a delicious breakfast with Howard and his wife, I thanked them and headed out. The ladies were already parking out front of the greenware factory.

The countryside I passed through became hillier and more forested. A good

portion of the woods were pines. There weren't many farms, and homes were very modest and few and far between.

I stopped at one old timer's place on a hillside to get some water for Brownie. I noticed the man had rows and rows of a strange looking plant in his garden. They were about three feet tall with a leafy top

He exclaimed, "Them's collard, poe folk's greens."

"How come they're so tall?" I asked.

"Well sir, you break the lower leaves off them as they grow. You boil the leaves up and eat them like cooked spinach. They grew real easy. I guess that's why most folks have them in their gardens around here," he added. I'd have a chance to try this fare as I went on south. Often times I'd let that plate pass me by. I never liked cooked spinach either.

As I went on, I kept thinking the woods on both sides of the road would surely give out and a nice farm would appear. But on and on we went. It must have been about an hour past sunset when I decided I absolutely must get off the road. The cars had their headlights on. It was getting downright scary on that winding and hilly road as darkness descended. The cars seemed to whip past me even faster and closer. I was ready to grab any wide spot by the side of the road for the evening. I passed a shabby small house with a couple of barefoot, dirty faced kids in the bare sandy yard. I waved to the kids. Shyly, they waved back.

Finally I came upon a little clearing of about a half acre. It showed signs of having been worked sometime in the distant past. It was now just a tangle of weeds. I pulled up alongside a large oak tree that had a little grass around it. All around us the hills rose steeply. The trees and brush beyond this spot were quite dense. Since the soil was sandy, I decided not to try and stake Brownie out, lest he pull the stake out of the ground like he had been known to do before. I tied him to the oak tree.

I had some water in my five gallon oak barrel which I poured in my bucket for Brownie to drink. He slurped it down quickly. I gave him an extra ration of grain to tide him over. When I went to bed I was quite anxious about my situation. There was little or no grazing for Brownie. Most worrisome of all, I had no permission to be on that property. I slept with my cloths on in case I'd have to deal with an irate land owner during the night. Waking up at 4:00 AM, I decided to fry up some pancakes for breakfast on my smoky stover and be ready to head out at first light.

I was downing my last pancake when a sheriff's car pulled up to the back of the wagon. It was still plenty dark out. Their high beam headlights blinded me completely. Two deputies stepped out of the car and came up to me.

"We got a call that you were trespassing on this property." They announced.

I quickly told them my story and why I was there. They were hardly interested and in no uncertain terms told me I would have to vacate the premises immediately or they would arrest me.

"Sirs," I said with all meekness, "If I could have worked something better out, I

sure would have done so. This spot was a last resort for me. I can assure you, this weed patch has no hold on me.”

As I rolled out onto the pavement I couldn't help but feel a little upset. The deputies passed me in their squad car a moment later to check on my progress. I know people are afraid of strangers because of all the crime they read about in the paper and see on TV. But I disliked being treated as though I was a criminal. As Brownie plodded along I kept an extra sharp lookout for traffic in the early morning grey light. I recalled an article I'd read just the day before. A woman delivering newspapers handed me a free local newspaper from the window of her car. The story on the front page that really caught my eye was about gypsies in the area. The headline read, 'Look out for Gypsies'. At first I thought it was a joke. But then I realized it wasn't. The local sheriff was warning people that there were gypsies in the area now and to avoid them. He told the paper that one of their scams was to contract house or barn painting jobs and use paint so cheap it would run off with the next thundershower. He also described how they looked.

He said, "They don't look like 'our people'. They have thick black hair and dark complexions." Considering the suspicion I'd aroused that morning, the sheriff might well have added, "They travel by horse-drawn wagon just as they did a hundred years ago."

The fact of the matter is that gypsies went to cars, just like everyone else. And besides I didn't fit the racial profile but rather, looked like 'our people'.

As I went farther south I was relieved to see changes for the better. The land flattened out and farms became a regular feature of the landscape. People were more relaxed about my presence and even interested again.

I was coming into the town of Rockingham on a hot day when a woman stopped me to talk. After she'd heard my story she exclaimed, "I have just the right business location for the weekend for you. You can park by my little country store and set up to take pictures."

I thought that sounded just ideal. It would be typical for a 19th century traveling tintype photographer to set up by a country store. I told the lady I would be sure to stop by. Threading my way through the side streets of town I got to the store shortly after noon. But, it wasn't the quaint old wood clapboard store I'd pictured in my mind. This was a quick fill gas station with a convenience store surrounded by a huge gravel lot.

The road out front was extra busy, and behind the store was a huge rock crushing plant with a constant stream of rock hauling trucks coming and going. The air was thick with dust from all the activity. There was no grass or shade for Brownie anywhere nearby.

The lady store owner greeted me with all smiles and enthusiasm, "Quite the perfect location isn't it?"

I had to admit there were lots of people coming and going. Most of them had only gas, a six pack of soda pop, and a pack of cigarettes on their minds though.

“They’re all potential customers for you. Right?” the woman continued. “I think folks would love to have their old time portrait snapped of themselves up on your cute little wagon.”

When she said that I knew she didn’t understand what kind of work I did. “I use my old camera and the old tintype process,” I had to point out. “I don’t do snapshots. Also, it wouldn’t be historically correct for a 19th century photographer to take portraits by his wagon. That would be something like a modern day portrait photographer taking pictures of people by his Ford van.”

What with the phone ringing, the roar of the gravel trucks, and demands of customers coming and going, it was hard to put my point across. I struggled to find one redeeming feature in this location, other than the store likely had an ample amount of cold milk and chocolate coated mini-donuts inside. I went in the store, purchased the milk and mini-donuts, and told the owner I’d be moving on, as the spot really didn’t suite my needs.

She looked surprised and a bit hurt. She told me, “Alright then, go on. We was just trying to help y’all out.” I guess she probably thought I was too good for her place. The fact was, we had little understanding between us. I felt a little bad because I had first told her before getting there that I’d give her place a try. But, I was very glad to be getting away from the noise, traffic and dust.

That night and the next day I stayed with a very hospitable family who had a few acres south of town. They invited me to take an extra day’s rest, and while I was there I had Brownie reshod by the local horse shoer. I was a little surprised when he pulled up in a new Chevy sedan instead of the more usual pickup truck. He was an older man, probably in his mid-fifties. Without a moment’s delay he got to work. His tools were in a box in the trunk of the car. He pulled out the new shoes and began to shape them. I held Brownie and watched him work. By this time I felt like I was getting the hang of what horseshoeing was all about.

“You’re going to put Borium on those, aren’t you?” I asked. Borium is the trade name for tungsgten carbide steel particles in a tin stick that when brazed onto the face of the shoe adds a great deal of traction and durability.

“No,” he told me, as he continued to work. “You don’t need Borium on these shoes. They’ve got turned down heels on them for plenty of traction.”

“The Amish in Lancaster County use Borium on their horses’ shoes. And I’ve been using it on mine.” I went on to say, “Even with Borium, I only get a couple months wear out of one set of shoes. I’d hate to go without it.”

“Listen son, if there is one thing I know about, it’s shoeing horses. I’ve been doing it over thirty years. I’m telling you, the heel is all you’ll need.”

Maybe he was right. I wasn’t about to get him mad and quit half way through the job. Brownie needed to be shod somehow so I could keep going. Soon the shoes were shaped and being nailed on. It amazed me how fast some shoers could work. Brownie stood fairly well to start with, but when the horse shoer got to his right rear hoof he

acted up a little bit. This earned him a swat on the rump by the horse shoer's big old rasp. I guess I couldn't blame the shoer. Brownie was a big horse and not that easy to be underneath shoeing.

The next day my host Bob bid me farewell and tried to give me a twenty dollar bill to take along for expenses. I refused this 'donation'. He'd given me a lot already with a place to camp, lush pasture for Brownie, help finding a horse shoer, and some great home cooked meals.

With all sincerity, Bob told me, "John, you really impress me. If I had it to do all over again, knowing the things in life I know now, I'd be doing just what you're doing."

I was flattered that the things I'd shared with him meant that much. I also couldn't help but notice that he didn't add the ending most people did: "I'd like to do just what you're doing, but I'd do it in a motor home." Bob once had a horse and cared for horses a lot. But more than that, he loved the spirit of what I was doing.

"I can't believe anybody would just step out on their own like you did in a horse and wagon."

Bob's wife and two teenage daughters had been most congenial, but they didn't share Bob's enthusiasm for my chosen lifestyle. They were sure they'd enter a deadly state of depression and brutal physical hardship if they didn't have cars and all the other modern conveniences. Bob's sixteen year old daughter had just gotten her driver's license and was giving her dad a soft, lovey dovey line that he should buy her a car.

Just to see what kind of reaction it would bring, I suggested, "How about a horse and buggy instead?"

Peals of laughter followed. "If you went by horse and buggy, you could have been driving years ago. And think of the money you'd save. There's no licenses or insurance to buy, and you'd never get a speeding or parking ticket." More laughter ensued. Bob on the other hand had been listening intently. He'd begun to tell me about himself, his successful career and the financial goals he'd reached.

"But money is here today and gone tomorrow," he said. "There has to be more to life. That's why I like what you're doing."

There seemed to be two distinct camps in this house. Bob, on the one side, felt he lacked something intangible in his life. He praised me for putting spiritual, mental growth and a sense of adventure first in my life. From our discussion on cars and the latest gadgets, I could see what the priorities were for Bob's wife and daughters. They spoke highly of career achievements and the things money could buy. It was clear that they saw my pursuits as a pitiful waste of time. I had heard these two opposing views before, and would hear them again as people freely gave me their opinion on life as I traveled.