

# Chapter Two

## A New Set of Wheels

It was now mid-spring of 1978. Some big changes had taken place since that maiden tintyping voyage to Tennessee in '76. Soon after, I quit my studio photographer job, rented my condo out, and went on the road in my Ford Econoline van to shoot tintypes at as many civil war reenactments as I could. That did not prove as lucrative as I had hoped. Travel expenses burned up most of my profits. I tried opening a permanent shop at a ski resort in North Carolina for a winter and that made even less profit.



I was forced to move back to my condo in Florida and get another studio photographer job. After my short taste of self-employment, this was one of the more boring and depressing points of my life. Not being able to take it any longer, I quit. It was my last "job".

I soon opened up another old time photo tintype studio in a beautifully restored turn of the century arcade building in downtown Orlando called the French Market.



I threw myself into it for all I was worth, but still the dream of being a horse drawn 19<sup>th</sup> century traveling photographer smoldered deep within me. The shop wasn't panning out. I began to resent being handcuffed to it six days a week, nine hours a day. The horse drawn dream steadily boiled up until one day I realized it wasn't just a fantasy or crazy idea. It was what I was meant to do. Perhaps it was the only thing left for me to do. It was time to be a horse-drawn 19<sup>th</sup> century photographer.

But wagons and horses to pull them were virtually non-existent in the central Florida area. I'd recently read an article about the Amish and their horse drawn lifestyle in Lancaster County, PA. So, I locked the shop up, hung a sign in the window "Gone Wagon Shopping," and drove my old Ford van all the way to Pennsylvania to see what I could find. I camped at a campground in Intercourse, Pennsylvania and spent my days searching for the right wagon. One afternoon I pulled up to the Fisher Coach Shop. There were a number of wagons parked out front. The one that really caught my eye had a "for sale" sign on it.

I leaned back in my seat, took a deep breath to relieve some of my excitement, and shut off the van's engine. Looking into the mirror I took stock of what I looked like. My rimless glasses were a little dirty, my short hair was wind-blown and my T-shirt and blue jeans were slightly rumped. I squinted into

the sun again at the one wagon in particular. "This could be it," I thought to myself. It was an open spring wagon of a utilitarian design, wooden and painted black. It was almost identical to the one that had been in my mind's eye for so long. Each spoke gleamed.

The occasional huge tour bus whirled by. Now I felt I had little in common with the people on that bus. I was here on business. Life altering business. Occasionally an Amish horse and buggy clip-clopped past; such a strikingly different sound. I stole a glance at one out the van's rear window. I caught a glimpse of the Amish driver as the horse strode past. The buggy's side door was pulled back and through the opening was the silhouette of the driver, the brimmed hat, bearded face and hands inclined forward, holding the reins. These were the people I wanted to have something in common with. Each buggy I saw only served to amplify my desire to be horse drawn too.

I watched until the buggy went around a curve and out of sight. I then headed toward the shop. A sign by the door said, "NO PHOTOS, NO TOURISTS". I thought of all the images I'd like to capture in Lancaster County. But I knew it would be very hard to capture the spirit of the Amish on film. And I intended to honor their belief which requires them not to have their pictures taken.

Stepping through the door I saw a man working on a buggy's running gear. He didn't look up. I walked back to the office window and noticed an elderly Amish man leaning over a wagon wheel, assembling it. He worked by the light from several windows that had many panes of glass in them. It was beautiful to see him at work by the natural light. I froze the image in my mind. In the next moment another Amish man popped into view.

"Yes, may I help you?" I was startled by his sudden appearance. And what an appearance it was. I took in the man's long dark beard and his bluntly cut hair. He was dressed neatly but in an altogether handmade fashion. The man bore with my quick inspection. Getting on with business, I asked, "How much is the spring wagon out front?"

"\$785," he replied.

I asked if he minded me looking it over. He had no objections, so I went back to my van, got out my tape measure and took a very important measurement. How long was the floor of the wagon box? It was a full seven feet, which was enough for all 6' 2" of me. I wanted to be able to sleep in my traveling wagon. I felt like buying the wagon right then and there, but decided to look around some more.

The rest of the day was spent at an auction up the road where antique wagons and related equipment were being sold. Nothing impressed me like the wagon at Fisher's though. I asked for advice from a few fellows who talked like they knew about wagons. Did they think \$785 was a fair price for a new Amish spring wagon? They assured me it was a reasonable price. On my way back to the campground where I was staying, I stopped at an Amish harness shop and priced harnesses for a single buggy horse. It seemed to run about \$160 for a basic set with collar. As I continued on I passed the Fisher Coach Shop and saw the spring wagon, still for sale. I resolved to go in first thing in the morning and buy it.

Morning came, and with it the sounds of the Amish farms that surrounded the hilltop campground. Diesel engines throbbed as they provided the power for milk coolers. And there was the ever present clip clop of the buggy horse hooves. Soon I was back at the coach shop and forking over my \$785 to the man I'd spoken to the day before. The old man was again at work assembling wheels. The younger man was working underneath a boxy gray -topped wagon peculiar to this area. I was waiting for my receipt when the younger man, continuing with his work, spoke to me. I was a little surprised to be addressed.

"Wagons are an expensive hobby, you know," he said.

"But it will be more than a hobby for me," I replied, stepping closer.

Perhaps I'd gotten his curiosity up when I'd measured the wagon the day before.

"Oh yeah?" The Amish man crawled out from under the wagon quickly and stood up. "What are you planning?"

This man's style was almost exactly like the other man's, but he was a little taller, maybe 5' 10" and thin. I excitedly began to share my plans to travel from Pennsylvania to Florida in a horse and wagon. "I've got a few more things to tie together, like building a top on the wagon I just bought, and then I'll be ready to go."

"That sounds pretty interesting. But what does your family think of all this?"

"I'm pretty much on my own," I explained.

The Amish man nodded slightly.

"After I get this wagon back to Florida I'm going to sell my car too."

The man's eyes grew wider at this. "That sounds like some adventure."

Then, rather abruptly, he asked, "what's your name?"

"John Coffey."

He turned this over in his mind for a moment. "I wasn't brought up Amish," I said. "I just wanted to try something like this, that's all. What's your name?"

"Chris Lapp."

It was incredible to be standing with this man, his bearded, backwoods Abe Lincoln-like face looking at mine so intently. I admired him for his beliefs and felt pleased to have his attention.

"How are you going to support yourself?"

"I do portraiture using historical photographic processes." I watched his face, sure he wouldn't like this much. But he showed no sign of alarm. "I'm going to pack my big antique camera and photo chemicals in the wagon and find customers along the way." I wasn't surprised to see that Chris didn't share my photographic interest. But at least he wasn't backing away.

"Where do you plan to buy your horse?"

"Probably around Lancaster County," I replied. I couldn't be any more specific because I didn't know myself.

"And where are you going to get your harness?"

I got a little uncomfortable under such close examination, but I replied, "I've looked around some but don't know exactly where I'm getting my harness either. Chris had another question for me. "Have you ever driven a horse and wagon before?" I had to admit I hadn't and thought to myself defensively, "This

man is sure a stickler for small details.”

Chris just stood there a minute, looking at me. “I’ve got a set of harness I’d sell you for \$50,” he finally said quietly.

“I’d like to look at it,” I replied, breathing a sigh of relief. Maybe Chris didn’t dislike me for being such a greenhorn after all. Chris explained where he lived. It was near the campground I was staying at. I figured I’d stop by early that evening, which was fine with Chris. We talked some more. Chris shared a few pointers on where to get a horse and added some ideas about what kind of horse he thought would be best for the trip. Every word was gold to me. There was so much I needed to know.

Chris was looking at me and thinking about something. “I really do like what you’re planning,” he said finally. “In fact, I’ve thought I’d like to do something like it. Maybe that’s why I’d like to help you get started. I tell you what. Maybe you could stay in a guest room of sorts we have in our barn while I help you find the right horse and teach you to drive. Would you like that?”

I was dumbfounded. Part of me wanted things to slow down so I could get control of myself. But I was nodding and smiling at Chris, pleased and relieved to be getting his help and expert advice. That night, at Chris’s, we talked some more and I bought the harness. We stood out by the barn watching Chris’s little children playing in the front yard. There was only one point which especially concerned Chris. He addressed me with a low, serious voice. “While you’re staying here you can’t be taking pictures of any Amish people. You can photograph the barn, the house, the animals or the buggies. But I don’t want you photographing us.”

I assured Chris I had no intentions of that sort. Even if someone disagreed with his beliefs, it would be hard not to respect Chris. He was a man of integrity. There were plenty of tourists in Lancaster County. With his family, big barn, house, and full time work, Chris undoubtedly had plenty of things he could be doing. But he was extending himself to me, someone whose credentials were quite vague. And he was doing it free of charge, all for goodwill.

Something had clicked between us. I was a little mystified by this good natured Amish man. And Chris was no doubt a little curious about me. Very simply, we went over the plan. I’d haul the wagon back to Florida where I’d build the top. Then I’d be back at Chris’s in a month or so. After work Chris would take me around in his buggy until we found the right horse. I returned to the campground and headed for home the next day. The spring wagon was partially disassembled and strapped to the top of the van.

Home, at this point, was a rented warehouse space because I’d sold my condo. Home was rows and rows of boxes, shelves and a loft. Some furniture, clothes and other things I’d accumulated over the years were all packed away here. In a way I was relieved to see it all just as I’d left it. But in another way it was such a burden to me now. It was early June and the heat inside the warehouse was stifling.

I just stood by the doorway, picking up the air from outside which was relatively cool. It had been a long drive from Pennsylvania back to Florida. Getting accustomed to it all here took a minute. Then I proceeded to settle in. My nest was up on the loft I’d built. There was a mattress and some shelves up

there. After unloading the spring wagon and moving it in, I felt all together again. I was pleased with how I'd organized things for the space I needed. Parked near the wagon was the '52 MG TD sports car I'd restored. I looked at both the car and the wagon with admiration. Then I drove to Malcomb's Hungry Bear to partake of their "All You Can Eat" buffet. Evening was spent in the warehouse touching up plans for the wagon top.

Unaccustomed to the darkness of my new home, I overslept in the morning. When I woke I noticed the slightly musty smell that always lingered in this warehouse. It wasn't the orange blossom aromas that floated in the windows of my condominium. I sat up and considered things a moment. But the loft was no place to linger. It was getting warm up there already. I skipped breakfast, hopped into my van and, like a thousand other commuters, made my way through the streets of Orlando.

The French Market was my destination, a little portrait shop in particular. "Good mornings" greeted me as I proceeded on foot now, past the other shops in the market. In a way I'd miss it here, especially the couple who ran the French pastry shop. I got out the key to my own shop and swung open the door. For the past year this had been my little haven. I'd arranged it all so carefully. Antiques and old wooden cameras were on shelves along the walls. Lacy costumes hung against one wall, plumed hats and everything to outfit the elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century family. I checked my darkroom and came back out. Through the big glass windows on one side I could see people sipping coffee and munching breakfast goodies in the Market's restaurant. Someone looked up and pointed my way. Steps sounded in the corridor and went on past. I didn't have to be concerned today whether or not anyone came into my shop because today I was taking it all apart.

How many days had I longed for some activity to be going on in this shop and hoped for a customer. But, I must say I photographed the most famous person of my life here, and that was Tiny Tim.



Now I was done with having to be bored. I started packing things up, one by one, folding the old time costumes, disassembling my big studio camera stand. Then, Gute, the French Market's caricature artist, poked his head in the door. "What's going on in here?" he asked, as though he didn't know. Gute was always good for a laugh.

"No more monthly rent, no more long hours sitting in this shop, Gute," I looked at Gute sideways and smiled slightly. "You wouldn't know what I'm talking about, now would you?"

"No, I certainly wouldn't," he replied laughing.

"Hey, I got my wagon."

Gute said he was happy for me. "Ready to head out?"

"No, not quite yet. Won't it be great though? Can't you see it now? I'll be coming to the farms and small towns of America just like the horse-drawn photographers used to. Imagine how this camera, all my chemicals and props, will look packed into my wagon." I was triumphant.

"Hey, that's great, John. Whoops, there's some good looking chicks. I'll see you later."

With that Gute left. Although not the lady's man Gute was, I usually would have at least stolen a peek. Today I kept busy. My thoughts continued with the dialogue I'd started with Gute. "And when I'm not doing portraits I can be taking pictures and learning all the old ways of doing lots of things. What an adventure!"

Stay tuned for the further adventures of John and Brownie, coming soon to a computer near you!!