

Chapter Six

Home is Where You Find It

I continued going south through the beautiful Virginia countryside, maintaining my course just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Considering the fact that Virginia had once been the Rebel's stronghold, I was a little surprised to pass through a town named Unionville. As it came time to make camp I noticed a farm that looked like a good possibility. The farmer there suggested I go talk to his brother who lived a couple of miles on down the road. These were the Nixon brothers. I couldn't help but think they must be staunch Republicans with a name like that.

With the light fading fast I reached the other Nixon's farm. I discovered there was a cattle guard at the entrance way but thought, no problem, and urged Brownie on. Trusting me as he did, Brownie proceeded on, like he'd gone over the cattle guard at the pig farm the previous evening. In the next moment Brownie collapsed. All four of his legs had gone through and Brownie was flat against the bars on his belly. I next expected to hear bones break and the shafts of the wagon snap. Horror gripped me.

I gently got down out of the wagon saying, "Easy Brownie. It's O.K., it's O.K.," in the most soothing voice my panicked condition could muster. I quickly undid the traces and holdback straps. At that moment Brownie tucked his legs up under himself to get a bit of a footing on a couple of the boards and then lunged out of the trap he'd been held in. I was sure he had to have hurt himself in some way. With a quick inspection in the now fading light I could see he had only yanked a shoe off and had gotten a few superficial scrapes on a couple legs. I led him around some and he was walking normally. I took his check rein off and let him graze. That helped us both to relax.

I went back to the cattle guard and pulled the Photographic Van across by hand. I was mad at myself for being so stupid as to assume all cattle guards were alike. This one had much bigger gaps between the boards. This one also had a much deeper trench under it. It wasn't piled in with dirt like the one the other day had been. I hitched Brownie up. I guess he had thought he was certainly done for the day. He got back at me by stepping on my foot. That really hurt, but I deserved it.

We continued down the lane to the big old farm house. No one seemed to be at home. It was almost dark. As much as I hated to impose, I couldn't think of any other alternative but to just go ahead and make myself at home as best I could. I parked the wagon by some outbuildings and turned Brownie loose in the pasture with the cattle.

About then, the farmer and his family returned. What an awful position to be in for all of us. As I had expected, they weren't exactly thrilled that I'd crashed in on them. But they were civil and would allow me to camp overnight.

After a while they invited me up to the house for a sandwich and some conversation. The middle aged farmer, his wife and two grade school children listened attentively as I told them my story.

Then the daughter asked me, "Where did you start from?"

The father quickly interjected, "Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," as if to say, you're not going to use that questionable word, intercourse, in my house.

When we talked earlier outside, I had told him I'd left from Intercourse, Pennsylvania. That made me think of a story Chris Lapp had told me. He'd been on a trip and tried to make a long distance call back home and needed operator assistance. When the operator asked, "What city please?" and he said, "Give me Intercourse," she'd hung up on him. From this point on I just told people I was traveling from Lancaster County.

My hosts said they'd help me find a horseshoer the next day. I needed one as I couldn't go on with Brownie minus one of his shoes. Then they wished me goodnight. They told me outright that I couldn't stay in the house because they were afraid of strangers. The next morning the horseshoer arrived in a new black shiny Chevy pickup with a camper shell over the back, packed with all the tools of his trade. He was quick to boast he was not just a backyard horseshoer but a "Farrier". His prestigious qualifications included a degree from a well known farrier's school. Few horseshoers I have ever met were as confident. He was especially proud of the fact that he made his full time living shoeing horses.

"There are just too many slip shod operators out there working at it part time," he told me.

I agreed but didn't care, part time or full time, as long as the job got done. I had him reshoe Brownie all around. His shoes were getting pretty well worn down. It was good to get that taken care of while I had a chance and had the best "Farrier" in at least five counties doing the job. He lectured me while he worked; going on about how there ought to be a state licensing program for farriers.

He left me with these words: "I wouldn't dream of driving a buggy anywhere down the highway. That's awfully dangerous. You are just asking to be some red streak down a stretch of pavement." I was very glad when the shoeing job was all finished.

We got on our way. I shoveled dirt into the cattle guard crossing and put a few logs in the gaps on top of it. Brownie was scared to cross and half jumped over it, with the wagon bouncing and swaying behind him. Soon we were into our next town, Orange, Virginia. Stopping at lunchtime for a bite to eat under some shady trees, I was interviewed by the local newspaper man. Between mouthfuls I talked. He had an interesting story himself. He'd been a graduate of Harvard Law School and a lawyer. But when he reached middle age he decided being a small town newspaper owner and operator was more to his liking.

As the day wore on, Brownie's stride seemed to be slower than usual. Then I detected a limp in his left front leg. At quitting time I noticed a nice pasture on the hillside to my right and a small farm up a gravel drive. With great effort Brownie made the ascent. An elderly couple were outside mowing their lawn. They shut off the engine as I approached so they could hear what I had to say. I told them my usual spiel. But, they told me back, "We have cattle

in our pasture and can't help you. Try the people across the street."

Brownie seemed to be limping worse with each step. I urged him back down the hill and over to the neighbors. No one was home. I was about to continue on when the elderly couple I'd spoken with just moments before pulled up in their station wagon.

The woman spoke to me from the car window, "We just remembered. They're on vacation. We got to thinking how pitiful tired your horse looked and decided we could put him in our pasture overnight. We're not doing this for you," she had to add. "Mind ya now. We're doing this for your poor horse."

I was only slightly relieved. I wished Brownie's lameness was just from a little over exhaustion on a hot afternoon. Somehow I doubted it. The old couple rattled on.

"One has to be real careful of strangers these days. You know all the crime there is out there!"

I assured them my intentions were good and I had been interviewed by the Orange paper that day. That seemed to relax them some. After putting Brownie out to graze, the folks invited me in for supper. Afterwards I went out to check on him. Brownie's limp was getting much worse.

I told my hosts about Brownie's worsening lameness. The man had a brother who was an old horseman and supposedly knew all there was to know about such matters. They gave him a call and he came right over. As the last light of day was fading out, we looked the situation over. By now Brownie didn't want to put even the slightest pressure on his foot. The old bib front overalls Virginian left me with a pretty grim diagnosis.

He said, "The horse is bad lame and probably won't be able to stand by morning."

I was thoroughly depressed. But at the same time I had an overriding faith that somehow, someday, Brownie would snap out of it. For some reason, my hosts were utterly congenial now. They invited me to sleep in an extra guest room in their basement. I prayed hard for Brownie as I dropped off to sleep.

First thing in the morning my host came into the room, snapped on the lights and shouted, "Rise and shine! Breakfast is near ready!" I got dressed and went upstairs quickly. It was one of my favorites, waffles.

Next, I was anxious to see Brownie. But where was he? Looking from the back door out on the main part of the pasture, he was nowhere in sight. After some tromping around I found him further up the hill, munching with his cattle buddies in a secluded spot. I thought, well, if he feels good enough to walk back here, he must be feeling better. As I led him back to the wagon he seemed to be walking normally. It wasn't until much later in my wagon travels that I came to realize what probably had been the source of Brownie's lameness. Traveling out West, just a day after having had Brownie shod, the same situation came up. A poorly placed horseshoe nail can quick the tender living tissue inside, just beyond the hoof wall, and cause a degree of inflammation and soreness. But, at this time in Virginia, I just breathed a sigh of relief. I took it easy with Brownie the next couple of days. I didn't push Brownie. We took extra long lunch breaks at grassy waysides. Nice people put us up in style and Brownie was fully back to his usual self.

I got a lot of attention because of Brownie. Before I became associated with him, people never dropped in out of nowhere with as much interest in my life. The marvel was I never saw Brownie act interested back unless they had something for him to eat. I pulled up one afternoon to Ash Lawn, the restored mansion of James Monroe, the fifth president. The woman in charge was most agreeable and affable to me camping and doing my tintype portrait business for a couple of days there. Brownie, she decided, was very cute and loveable. I was getting used to living in his limelight. The grounds were well manicured but she allowed me to park in a prime spot out front on the lawn beneath one of the many large Ash trees.

Brownie could have the run of the place, after hours anyway, as it was all surrounded by good fencing. During the day I was to keep him tied up. The first evening Brownie broke into the garden. I found him eating the corn to his heart's content, squashing the other assorted vegetables under his big hoofs. The rope I'd secured across the entrance to the garden behind the mansion was dangling in the breeze, as he had just barged right on through it. I felt there wasn't all that much damage, but then it wasn't my garden. Brownie was clearly proving he wasn't an overstuffed teddy bear but more like the proverbial bear in the china shop.

The next morning while Brownie was still untethered and I was unpacking a few things, getting ready for the day's business, I heard a woman scream, "Grab the baby- wild horse on the loose!" I looked over to see Brownie scratching his belly on a long row of small trees that he was briskly walking the length of. Brownie had a very expressive face which I was learning to read. His lips were quivering and his eyes were half shut. Thus his face was registering intense pleasure as he scratched his itch. I was sure the woman's baby was the last thing on his mind. Not everyone saw the easy going streak in Brownie, though. Maybe they heard about the commotion up at the office. The woman in charge came out to discuss our agreement again. I had mounted my "J.A. Coffey, Tintype Portraiture" banner over my painted backdrop and secured a flag on either side, one for the Union and one for the Confederacy.

"It looks like a carnival has come to Ash Lawn."

I knew she had a point. I'd been thinking Ash Lawn wasn't our kind of place.

"Maybe we better just leave," I suggested.

"Oh no. But could you just tone it down? I mean the banner and flags are a bit too much." She was being tactful and went on to explain that some V.I.P.s were due to arrive soon.

I took down the flags and banner. In fact, I never displayed them in such a manner again. From there on out things progressed pleasantly enough, with the Photographic Van under the shade trees and Brownie tied to a small tree nearby. A few customers had their tintypes made while a flock of colorful peacocks milled about the grounds.

It was now halfway into the month of October, with a few cool breezes blowing behind me. I left Ash Lawn and continued on South. At Scottsville I came upon the beautiful James River Valley. I picked up my General Delivery Mail, which included a letter from my sister in California, my best friend Gary in

Florida, and one from the Lapp family back in Intercourse. Before heading on I read them voraciously. These were the people I most wanted to stay in touch with. I found a small grocery store, housed in one of the old town buildings like so many were in this part of the country. I tied Brownie to a nearby telephone pole, as was often the case, for lack of a good hitching rail. Although the wagon was wide open and something could have happened to excite Brownie in a disastrous way, I did my shopping unhurriedly. It seemed to be a law abiding, quiet and peaceful little town.

I picked up some cans of beans, Chunky soup, bread, butter, milk, tuna fish, lettuce, baloney, mayo, and a few other odds and ends. I headed on out of town, going due west on a fairly busy two lane road, with Brownie being oblivious to the cars whizzing by as usual. Thankfully we turned off on a more peaceful road. It was a grey line road on my state map. My Virginia state map was getting pretty tattered by now, I looked at it so much. We probably had gone about seventeen miles that day, and so it was time to start looking for a place to camp. A couple of places I asked sent me on down the road. I was starting to wonder if I might have to camp alongside the road.

One person I had talked to suggested a farm up ahead that had a good sized cow pasture. The sun was just sinking over the western hills when I got there. To my consternation, the house was dark and there didn't seem to be anybody at home. I pulled up the driveway anyway, got out of the wagon and went to check and see. I felt like I was wasting my time as I knocked at the front door and then the back door. There was no response. Gazing to the west I couldn't see any more farms ahead. So, what to do? There was plenty of grazing around and a lush stand of grass in the well fenced pasture. While I was thinking, I took Brownie out of the wagon shafts and let him eat the grass growing up along the edge of the driveway.

A pickup pulled in and a man with a big grin on his face got out and came over. I was conjuring up my storyline when he asked, "Is John around?" So he wasn't the owner. I told him I was waiting for John too and hoped I could put my horse in his pasture over night. I briefly explained to the man how I camped and how I slept in my wagon.

"John's a good egg. I'm sure he'll let you stay." The man turned to leave and said as he went, "I'll catch him later."

He'd greatly reassured me. I decided to hang onto my hope. Going on and parking alongside the road was just too gloomy a prospect.

An hour and a half later I was still standing there, holding Brownie and waiting, when a new luxury car pulled up and riveted its high beams on me. I waved and tried to put on my most innocent expression. They sat there for several nerve wracking minutes while the engine idled. They were evidently deep in thought studying the scene before them. It was 9:30 and nearly pitch black out. When the car eased on past me I could faintly make out a middle aged couple inside. The garage door opened automatically, the car pulled in, and the door went down behind it. My situation was becoming more awkward by the moment. I didn't expect or need a warm southern welcome and a table of home cooked food. All I wanted was somewhere well off the road to park for the night and a secure place for Brownie.

I wondered what was next as the butterflies fluttered in my stomach. A few minutes later the man came out of the house with flashlight in hand, scanning the area around me.

“What do you think you are doing here?” he asked.

I explained my story and situation as humbly and cheerfully as I could.

“There is no place for you here. You’ll have to move it on down the road. What with all the crime there is, you just can’t trust nobody anymore.” That was a line I’d heard more than just a few times already.

I explained how dangerous it was for me to continue on in the dark, moonless night. Two cars raced past out front and sped into the night as if to emphasize my point.

“It would be a certain death,” I added emphatically. I didn’t feel as though I was just feeding him a line. With a bitter look on his face, the man capitulated to my needs. He showed me where to get water and the gate to the pasture.

When he left he told me, “Be packed up and gone by 7:00 in the morning.” Without a shadow of a doubt, I was a trespasser and possibly suspected of much worse. It was an awful feeling.

By about 10:00 I had things squared away for the night. I hadn’t eaten anything since noon. I had lost my appetite. I was at least glad to be off the road but felt a little unnerved, half wondering when the police might arrive. With my kerosene lamp shining before me in the wagon I wrote a letter to a friend and also my journal entry for the day, using my dip pen as usual. I flipped back through the journal after I was done, taking solace in the entries describing friendly folks and great camp spots.

The next morning “No Hospitality John” came out of the house at 7:00 sharp and stood there glaring at me, jingling the keys and change in his pockets. I saw a curtain pull back and there were two women looking out at me from inside the house. Then I realized that possibly someone had been home the evening before, sitting in darkness and trembling in fear. Perhaps this family had suffered more mental anguish than I had. They may have laid awake all night tossing because a wagon traveler was camped out front along their driveway. I got things together as quickly as I could and was gone before John had to leave for work at 7:30.

I vowed to start looking for a camp spot earlier in the day. Clearly, I needed to allow time for a couple of rejections. But the next day I didn’t have to ask more than once. I was invited to stay overnight at a large plantation style farm along the James River. The bottom land was covered with several huge pastures and an equally large herd of beef cattle. On the high bluff over looking it all sat the magnificent classic plantation house. The friendly owner, Mr. Wilcox, was quick to point out how this mansion had been built by slave labor and designed by Thomas Jefferson. It did indeed have a striking resemblance to Jefferson’s Monticello which I had passed by a few days back. Keeping up with the Jones has a long history, I mused.

I was directed to put my wagon in a clearing nearby and put Brownie in one of the large cow pastures. I was introduced to the Wilcox’s son, Rick, and Gary, the artist in residence. They were friendly and about my age. Rick

invited me over to his nearby place for hamburgers. Rick's dad and Gary would be there too. It had begun drizzling rain by now and I was glad I'd gotten settled in somewhere so nice. However, Mr. Wilcox had a vicious looking dog. It was a Rottweiler, the breed that looks like an over inflated Doberman Pinscher. There was no pinch with this guy, his jaws were huge. To add to the effect, the dog wore a collar studded with silver spikes.

Mr. Wilcox had introduced the dog to me as Rommel and added, "He is trained to kill. But if any of us are around he's quite harmless. Someone on the grounds venturing near the houses that he doesn't know will be attacked."

I said, "Hi Rommel! Nice, big doggy, good boy, good boy!" I patted his broad back and head to his pleasure. Supper, I was told, wouldn't be ready for an hour. So, I took my leave to get things straightened up in and out of the wagon. The men went on up to the house and told me to come on up when I was ready. Rommel followed along close behind them.

About forty five minutes later I started for the son's house, but halfway there, who should I meet but Rommel the attack dog. No one else was in sight. The dog looked at me. Then the hair on his back rose. His fangs appeared with accompanying snarls. I stopped dead in my tracks, held my ground and began calling his name in every sugar coated fashion I could muster.

"Oh Rommel, you good smart dog, don't you remember me?"

Fairly quickly the hair settled down on his back, the stub of his late tail began to wag and his nose went to the ground and off he went past me down the hill to continue his patrol.

I went on to the son's house. The rich man and his wife were there. They laughingly apologized for forgetting about Rommel and leaving him outside.

The artist piped in, "I've been living here about a year and Rommel has finally gotten used to me only recently."

After supper, good conversation and a much needed shower, I turned in to the wagon. It was still drizzling rain. By morning it was pouring. I turned over in my bedroll and slept in until it mostly quit. Then I got up and started to get things arranged to head out. Rick came down and suggested I eat breakfast with him. Rick and Mr. Wilcox offered to let me stay over another day if I didn't want to travel in the rain. I gladly took them up on the offer.

By late morning the rain stopped. Rick and his dad, fully aware by now of my interest in history, suggested I spend some time investigating an old previously water powered flour mill just a mile or so down river from their place along the railroad tracks. I headed out on foot and soon found it. And what a mill it was. Or what a ghost town, I should say. The mill had eight stories. It was made of cut stone and had a slate roof. It was all overgrown with vines, small trees and brush. I had to pick my way through the jungle to get to the ground floor entrance. Inside it was a ruin but most of the floors were still intact. A lot of the old machinery was still there. I noticed several sets of huge grinding stones still in place.

A long unused dirt road ran in front of the mill and a couple of old homes that had long since been abandoned were on the other side. One of them was a log cabin. I marveled at how forgotten this little backwater bend in the river was. It was amazing that the mill and the old outbuildings hadn't been torn down

or at least stripped by now. I walked back to Rick's and told him how impressed I was with it all.

He said, "My dad and I will take a tractor down there someday and pull out the old mill stones. Then we'll set them up in the yard somewhere."

I couldn't help but wish these super wealthy people would take a more constructive interest in it and preserve the mill or even restore it, rather than demolish it.

The artist, Gary, suggested we go for a ride and he'd show me more things of historic value in the area. I could also pick some ears of corn from one of the farm's fields for Brownie's enjoyment. On our tour we stopped by an elegant large old house that Mr. Wilcox's elderly aunt lived in. She invited us inside. I marveled at all the priceless and beautiful antiques she had neatly arranged throughout the house. When she heard I was practicing 19th century photography, she brought out a very special old photograph. It was a 6 ½ x 8 ½ inch cased daguerreotype of a group of her ancestors. It was the largest I'd yet seen and was magnificent in every respect.

The daguerreotype was the first photographic process to be widely practiced. It was introduced in France in 1839 and quickly spread to this country a year later. They resemble a jewel, having a silvery mirror look, and were often put up in ornate gold matted, silk or embossed velvet padded leather cases. The subjects nearly always had their finest attire on and a dignified expression on their face, just like they would have for an oil painting. All this added fuel to the fire that burned inside me to preserve such old photographic techniques.

Back at my camp after supper, Gary the artist in residence invited me to come over to his place on the estate to see his carvings. He lived in a small red brick cottage that had been servant's quarters. His specialty was carving ivory and exotic woods such as ebony. He had several exquisite pieces to show. One was an ivory knife handle in the shape of a hawk's head. It was particularly fabulous with its precise rendition and detail. He was rightfully very proud of it. Once more I marveled at the wealth that existed in the Virginia countryside. I could only fantasize about what the mansion looked like inside. I was never invited in there. Perhaps they thought I was too great a security risk.

The next day I headed on under grey skies. Many of the homes along my route contrasted greatly with the Jeffersonian mansion and well kept grounds where I'd spent most of the past couple of days. It was one little shaky looking shack after another. These abodes were tucked away in clearings in the woods, but they lacked the charm such a setting might suggest. The assortment of wrecked cars in many of the yards added a good bit to the overall junkiness.

As I headed down the hill into the tiny town of Wingina, I noticed more than the usual amount of litter along the side of the road. Maybe the locals had stopped noticing all the trash. Beer bottles and cans made up a great portion of the litter. Judging by this, perhaps people were too drunk to know the difference. I couldn't help but see things up close. When the wagon wheels would roll over a can it would sometimes crimp itself onto the steel tire. At times I had three or four cans going around and around on my wheels jangling and clanging until they would eventually fall off and finally give us some peace.

As a wagon traveler I had time to savor the roses and hear the birds sing, but also see the local beer cans and hear their clatter on my wagon wheels.

At the Wingina general store I bought milk and donuts, my favorite snack. The owner was quite friendly and told me I ought to check out the old horse shoes he had in the basement. I went down a rickety short flight of wooden stairs and looked them over, but none were Brownie's size. The owner also pointed out a water line on the wall from the last time the James River flooded. Soon I was back on the road. I seemed to have it all to myself. It was extraordinarily quiet and peaceful. It began to rain steadily and picked up as time went on. I pushed onward and tried not to notice, but eventually it got the best of me. Wet feet were my main complaint. I'd been traveling through a forested area for quite a few miles and hadn't seen a house or farm.

Then I came upon a clearing in the woods, maybe twenty acres of low grass. It wasn't the richest kind of grazing, but neither was it overgrown with weeds. A two rut muddy road ran off, along one side, to the back of the field. I had no permission to pull in and make camp, but figured I'd take my chances and besides, there was no place to ask. Sometimes it's easier to apologize should it come to that than to get permission.

I'd been thinking about building a big campfire and could hardly wait to dry and warm myself by it. I turned Brownie loose to graze. He stayed close by while I gathered fallen branches from the pine woods nearby. The wood was wet. I used my little hatchet to cut and split some of it up. Then, starting the fire using a little dry wood I had in the wagon, I was able to get things going quickly into a nice blaze. The rest of the wet wood piled around the fire dried soon enough and burned well when pushed on in. Later on when the rain stopped, I was all warm and dry and had eaten a simple dinner fried up over the campfire.

I had this place all to myself. In fact I felt like I could have been the last man on earth. I listened to the rain drops dripping off the pine boughs, Brownie munching, the insects chirping and the occasional bird call. By bedtime the sky had cleared. The stars and a half moon shone brightly. I had driven a couple of metal tent stakes into the ground near the wagon and tethered Brownie to them on the end of a twenty foot length of heavy rope. I figured this was better than tying the rope to a tree that he would surely wrap himself up around.

In the morning I stepped out of the wagon into a dense fog. I immediately looked over to where Brownie had been staked out. There was just a mowed circle and no Brownie in sight. I called out his name in vain. Then I walked the field looking for any tracks. Soon I found him, to my immense relief, at the other end of the field near the edge of the road, still eating to his heart's content. He had the long rope and stakes trailing along with him. I was coming down now from a panic. I thought, where would he have gone anyway? Brownie had lost all sense of where his old home was. Myself and the wagon were the closest thing to home to him now.

It was a cool morning as I continued on through the woodlands. The fog had lifted and I had my sights fixed on another historic town, Appomattox. As the sun rose like a big red ball of fire, so did my spirits. The warmth was a cheery welcome on this crisp fall day. The air was perfectly still and the sky deep

blue. Everything looked especially sharp and focused.

The woods of conifer and deciduous trees were largely uninhabited. Not one car passed me all morning. The smooth blacktop road was ours for the taking. Maybe I was Adam and this was the garden, I mused. Little creeks rippling along beside the road gave an extra sparkle to the scene. At peaceful times like this I would take out my harmonica and play some simple tunes like "Oh Susannah" or "Amazing Grace". Brownie kept the beat with the rhythmic clip clop of his hooves. When I stopped playing, my accompaniment seemed to be magnified. The sound of Brownie's hooves and the rumbling of the wagon wheels were the sounds of the life I'd grown to love so much.