

The Artist's Almanac

July 2007

*Almost every one has some journey of pleasure in his mind,
with which he flatters his expectation.
He that travels in theory has no inconveniences;
he has shade and sunshine at his disposal,
and wherever he alights finds tables of plenty and looks of gaiety.*

Samuel Johnson

July is hot upon us. This is the month we think seriously of vacation and traveling, a time to escape ourselves and our everydayness.

Travel and travail have the same root; *travailler*, from Middle English, to torment, labor, journey or torture. We all remember missed flights, noise, sleepless nights, and disgusting food. Yet we never forget our first view of the Grand Canyon or Fujiyama, and we try to share our excitement with our friends by making them watch our slides.

Partygoers make small talk by comparing foreign sites visited, a variation on 'who d'ya know'. This may morph into a subtle contest, as more exotic destinations such as Libya, and Angkor Wat, are used to trump yesterday's favorites, such as Paris, Rome and China. 'Been there, done that.'

Why is it impossible for us to experience the Grand Canyon and to see it for what it is, as did the first Spanish explorers? Walker Percy calls this problem 'preformulation, the packaging of the object by modern culture'. In his award-winning novel, *The Moviegoer*, his character Binx Bolling attempts to escape the malaise of his life by going to movies all day, a form of rotation.

A good rotation Bolling defines as "...an experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new. ...Taking one's first trip to Taxco would not be a rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost on the way and discovering a hidden valley would be."

Percy says 'the concept that the road is better than the inn describes rotation. It is better to be focused on what lies around the bend than on the stillness of the moment.' He goes on to agree with Dr. Johnson that rotation may be achieved as easily at home as by traveling, as in a good book. We may find it all around us if we will but learn to look at our surroundings like a patient released from hospital. Rotation is within our minds, where we live our lives.

The best vacation I ever enjoyed was as a boy, in Red Boiling Springs, fifty miles from home. There were new friends there and a pony. There were deep woods to explore with a shady rippling creek to wade, and new fish to pursue. At noon the big dinner bell rang and we went into the large dining hall with family size tables. After my Father was called on for the blessing, we treated ourselves to fried chicken, and steaming bowls of mashed potatoes with gravy, green beans, dumplings, gravy, cabbage, peas, apples, tomatoes, and

dressing. Dessert was usually a fruit cobbler or strawberry shortcake, with fresh whipped cream.



The General Dance - Bill Puryear, Artist

After dinner the adults played horseshoes as the older ones rocked on the long shaded verandas and talked away the languorous summer afternoon. We bowled five pins or took off to the creek to construct a gravel dam and deepen a cool pool. At night the promenade along Main Street twinkled with lights from its twelve old hotels as the bands played in the pavilions and Mother and Daddy joined the dance. The bowling alleys thundered as grown men scattered the pins and made the setters duck for cover .We were living in the realm of pure potentiality. I felt I was part of the general dance and I wished it never to end.

Here in Tennessee we have much to see and experience, if we but open our eyes. Every Fourth of July in Smithville The Old Time Fiddlers' Jamboree is held. Musicians and Craft Vendors flock to it from across America. It is one of, if not the largest and oldest gathering of those who love Bluegrass. We choose a spot under a shade tree behind the courthouse in the midst of the throng of those warming up for their appearances.

These are amateurs, and this is homegrown American music. Heat, crowds, homemade ice cream, barbeque, funnel cakes and wares of all kinds, some finely finished hand carved wooden mixing bowls and hand woven baskets, as well as tacky paintings and T-shirts. There are fine dulcimers and autoharps on sale here, as well as local produce. The musicians are utterly un-self-conscious and without vanity and I love to seat myself in the shade in the middle of them and experience the cool breeze blowing and the sound of a dozen string bands as I watch a dancer as entranced as any dervish dance away the summer afternoon. The place, the people, the music, the Fourth of July – all combine to intoxicate me with joy and pride in America. I feel like dancing.



The Buck dancer – Bill Puryear, Artist

It was hot, too, in that close hall in Philadelphia that July 4th of 1776 as the thoughts of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson turned to home and Virginia, where the corn was ripening and where they needed to be. But the world was turning now, turning towards America and towards Freedom. This was something entirely new in the world, an expectation beyond all previous expectations – a people governing themselves. This was a good rotation indeed – the rotation of a tired old world into a new.

Long may it last.