
Shared Reminiscence

Atlanta Summer – 1943

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My “Old Maid Aunt,” Naomi, prided herself in being “the only woman used car dealer in Atlanta.” Her car lot was on Lucky Street on the way to downtown Atlanta from where she lived on Piedmont Avenue. Seemed like thousands of cars passed her place daily – or hourly.

It was the summer of 1943 and I was fourteen years old. World War II was in full swing. I was scheduled to go into 8th grade at Christ School in Arden, a private school that was to cost \$600 including room and board. My Dad was operating a grocery store, meat market and café in Fletcher, NC. I would have done almost anything that summer not to have to deal with killing cows and pigs and helping prepare them for sale in my Dad’s grocery store. I had that experience once, and that was enough.

I talked my friend Ken Johnson into going to Atlanta with me for the summer. We spent our first night in town in the Winecoff Hotel before calling my Aunt Naomi and hopefully moving in with her at no cost. She lived in a condominium that she owned on Piedmont Avenue just across the street from Piedmont Park, just around the corner from the Baseball stadium where the Atlanta Crackers of the Southern Baseball League played their games. It was easy access to downtown Atlanta – a super location.

She agreed to let us stay with her until we found jobs and could afford to get a room for the two of us in a boarding house. I soon got a job as a soda jerk at Rhodes Center Pharmacy, and Ken got a job there as cashier. We were making \$15 to \$25 between us a week – not much more than that I am sure. Rhodes Center Pharmacy was directly across the street from the Governor’s mansion.

Sometimes, there would be a cow grazing on the grass in the front yard of the Mansion. Gene Talmadge, the famous Georgia Governor, was in office for the third time. I think Ole Gene was using the “cow-grazing thing” to attract attention to his latest run for governor of Georgia. It was political season for Governor in Atlanta. Ellis Arnall was running against Talmadge, a great Georgia politician during his time. Either of them would do almost anything to gain attention.

At my Aunt’s condo on Piedmont Avenue, Ken and I would take turns sleeping on the couch. The other slept on the floor. After a while my aunt asked us to move out. I think we were cramping her style a bit with her several boyfriends. We found a boarding house just down the street for \$7.50 per week. We would split this cost until we added a young war veteran that had lost a foot. He would take his false foot off at night and place it on the dresser. One afternoon Ken and I picked some flowers from the front yard of the boarding house, filled our roommate’s false foot with water and put the flowers in it. The veteran did not think this prank too funny and soon left our company for other quarters.

On the Fourth of July, there was a “speaking and watermelon slicing” for the governor’s race, in a little town just down the road from where we were working. All day long a parade of people passed our place of work going to the event, including a group of Ku Klux Klansmen. Some of them were riding motorcycles and other vehicles. One marching group was carrying rifles. When Ken and I got off work, we decided to attend the event. There were hundreds of people there. I can see it as well today as then. Ole Gene, on the bed of a flatbed truck with a portable sound system, wearing red suspenders gleaming in the sun, the black shock of his hair hanging down almost to his chin, and him looking at the crowd and pronouncing:

“THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA HAVE THREE FRIENDS -- JESUS CHRIST -- GENE TALMADGE -- AND THE SEARS ROEBUCK CATALOG... IN THAT ORDER!” We went to several of his “speaking” and he would bring this saying into his speech at every one of them.

Next, my buddy Ken and I went to the Biltmore Hotel where Ellis Arnall had his headquarters. We walked in like we owned the place. We were welcomed, too. We had a few drinks and some eats, and

fortunately we found our way back to my aunt's place on Piedmont without any difficulty.

We went from time to time to "The Crackers" baseball games just around the corner from my aunt's condo. There was a second-rate movie house up the street where one could go for 50 cents and stay all day if desired. We made friends with the ushers. They would give us all of the popcorn we could eat and sometimes a soft drink. Man that was living! Something we did from time to time was to buy a 15 cents ticket on the trolley and ride it for hours, getting a transfer to another station at each station we came to. During that time there was a trolley that ran from the Piedmont Park area all the way to Five Points, Downtown. That seemed to be a long way to us, but was always a fun ride. We observed a lot of different people – young, old and in between.

There was another time when Bob Hope was playing in a park, but not Piedmont. It had a big stage with a screen to baffle the sound in the back of it. I can't remember the name of the place, but Ken and I went to Bob Hope's hotel after the show and talked the guard into letting us into his living room. Much to our surprise, there he was there with three or four additional people. We were just kids and talking with one of the greatest comedians of all times! And you know, he was very nice to us – attentive too!

One of my prized remembrances of our summer in Atlanta is the time one of my aunt's boyfriends, a Mr. Hall, was teaching me to drive and took me to work at Rhodes Center Pharmacy. As we were pulling up to the curb for me to get out and go to work, I hit a young black boy who was stepping off the curb. It scared the living daylights out of me. I turned to Mr. Hall and asked him what I should do. He quickly said, "Don't do a dammed thing. Just sit here in the car and be quiet."

The young boy did not move after I hit him. Mr. Hall got out of the car, went to the little boy, shook him a time or two, helped him up from the pavement and said something to him. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out some cash and handed it to the boy, who took it and went away. Mr. Hall then got back in the car. I got out and thanked him for bringing me to work. I never heard anything about the incident and never saw Mr. Hall again. Since Mr. Hall was one of my aunt's several boyfriends, I suspected that he either owned or had put some money into her used car business on Lucky Street.

So the summer of 1943 still holds a lot of remembrances for me. One very big comparison of that time and now is the Atlanta International Airport, one of the most beautiful and busiest airports in the world. At that time, it was made up of a group of Quonset huts. There were not nearly as many airplanes coming in and out of the airport as there are today. Times have changed dramatically since that happy summer of 1943.

