

This passage is an excerpt from a chapter in the book American Adventures, a Second Trip Abroad at Home, by American author and playwright Julian Street; it recounts his visit to Burge in 1915. Street was also instrumental in the publication of Dolly Burge's diary.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A BIT OF RURAL GEORGIA

To walk with the morning and watch its rose unfold;
To drowse with the noontide lulled in its heart of gold;
To lie with the night-time and dream the dreams of old.

—Madison Cawein.

A man I know studies as a hobby something which he calls "graphics"—the term denoting the reaction of the mind to certain words. One of the words he used in an experiment with me was "winter." When he said "winter" there instantly came to me the picture of a snowstorm in Quebec. I saw the front of the Hotel Frontenac at dusk through a mist of driving snow. There were lights in the windows. A heavy wind was blowing and as I leaned against it the front of my overcoat was plastered with sticky white flakes. The streets and sidewalks were deep with snow, and the only person besides myself in the vision was a sentry standing with his gun in the lee of the vestibule outside the local militia headquarters.

If my friend were to come now and try me with the word "spring," I know what picture it would call to mind. I should see the Burge plantation, near Covington, Georgia: the simple old white house with its rose-clad porch, or "gallery," its grove of tall trees, its carriage-house, its well-house, and other minor dependencies clustering nearby like chickens about a white hen, its background the rolling cotton fields, their red soil glowing salmon-colored in the sun. For, as I was never so conscious of the brutality of winter as in that evening snowstorm at Quebec, I was never so conscious, as at the time of our visit to the Burge plantation, of the superlative soft sweetness of the spring.

In seasons, as in other things, we have our individual preferences. Melancholy natures usually love autumn, with its colorings so like sweet sad minor chords. But what kind of natures they are which rejoice in spring, which feel that with each spring the gloomy past is blotted out, and life, with all its opportunities, begins anew—what kind of natures they are which recognize April instead of January as the beginning of their year I shall not attempt to tell, for mine is such a nature, and one must not act at once as subject and diagnostician.

So long as I endure, spring can never come again without turning my thoughts to northwestern Georgia; to the peculiar penetrating warmth which passed through the clothing to the body and made one feel that one was not surrounded by mere air, but was immersed in a dry bath of some infinitely superior vapor, a vapor volatile, soothing, tonic, distilled, it seemed, from the earth, from pine trees, tulip trees, balm-of-Gilead trees, (or "bam" trees, as they call them), blossoming Judas trees, Georgia crabapple, dogwood pink and white, peach blossom, wisteria, sweet-shrub, dog violets, pansy violets, Cherokee roses, wild honeysuckle and azalea, and the evanescent green of new treetops, all carried in solution in the sunlight. By day the brilliant cardinal adds his fine note of color and sound, but at night he is silent, and when the moon comes out one hears the mockingbird and, it may be also, two whippoorwills, one in the grove near the house, one in the woods across the road, calling back and forth. Then one is tempted to step down from the porch, and follow the voices of the birds into the vague recesses of a night webbed with dark tree shadows outlined in blue moonlight.

The train from Atlanta set us down at Covington, Georgia, or rather at the station which lies between the towns of Covington and Oxford—for when this railroad was built neither town would allow it a right of way, and to this day each is connected with the station by a street car line, either line equipped with one diminutive car, a pair of disconsolate mules, and a driver. Covington is the County seat, a quiet southern town, part old, part new, with a look of rural prosperity about it. Stopping at the post office to inquire for mail we saw this peremptory sign displayed:

When the window is down don't bang around and ask for a stamp or two.

—*J. L. Callaway, Postmaster.*

As the window was down we tiptoed out and went upon our way, driving through Oxford before going to the plantation. This town was named for Oxford, England, and is, like its namesake, a college town. A small and very old Methodist educational institution, with a pretty though ragged campus and fine trees, is all there is to Oxford, save a row of ante-bellum houses. One of them, a pleasant white mansion, half concealed by the huge magnolias which stand in its front yard, was at one time the residence of General Longstreet. The old front gate, hanging on a stone post, was made by the general with his own hands—and well made, for it is to-day as good a gate as ever. Corra Harris lived at one time in Oxford; her husband, Rev. Lundy H. Harris, having been a professor at the college.

Though plantation life has necessarily changed since the war, I do not believe that there is in the whole South a plantation where it has changed less than on the Burge plantation. In appearance the place is not as Sherman's men found it, for they tore down the fences and ruined the beautiful old-fashioned garden, and neither has been replaced; nor, of course, is it run, so far as practical affairs are concerned, as it was before the War; that is to say, instead of being operated as a unit of nine-hundred acres, it is now worked chiefly on shares, and is divided up into "one mule farms" and "two mule farms," these being tracts of about thirty and sixty acres, respectively, thirty acres being approximately the area which can be worked by a man and a mule.

Practically all the negroes on the place—perhaps a hundred in number—are either former slaves of the Burge family, or the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of slaves who lived on the plantation. That is one reason why the plantation is less changed in spirit than are many others. The Burges were religious people, used their slaves kindly, and brought them up well, so that the negroes on the plantation to-day are respectable, and in some instances, exemplary people, very different from the vagrant negro type which has developed since the War, making labor conditions in some parts of the South uncertain, and plantation life, in some sections, not safe for unprotected women.

The present proprietors of the Burge plantation are two ladies, granddaughters of Mrs. Thomas Burge, who lived here, a widow, with a little daughter, when General Sherman and his hosts came by. These ladies frequently spend months at the plantation without male protectors save only the good negroes of their own place, who look after them with the most affectionate devotion. True, the ladies keep an ugly looking but mild mannered bulldog, of which the negroes are generally afraid; true also they carry a revolver when they drive about the country in their motor, and keep revolvers handy in their rooms; but these precautions are not taken, they told me, because of any doubts about the men on their place, their one fear being of tramp negroes, passing by.

Of their own negroes several are remarkable, particularly one old couple, perfect examples of the fine ante-bellum type so much beloved in the South, and so much regretted as it disappears.

During the period of twenty years or more, while the owners were absent, growing up and receiving their education, the whole place, indoors and out, was in charge of Uncle George and Aunt Sidney. The two lived, and still do live, in one wing of the house—over which Aunt Sidney presides as housekeeper and cook, as her mother, Aunt Liddy, did before her. Aunt Liddy died only a short time ago, aged several years over a hundred. Uncle George supervises all the business of the plantation, as he has done for thirty or forty years. He collects

all rents, markets the crops and receives the payments, makes purchases, pays bills, and keeps peace between the tenants—nor could any human being be more honorable or possess a finer, sweeter dignity. As for devotion, when the little girls who were away returned after all the years as grown women, every ribbon, every pin in that house was where it had been left, and the place was no less neat than if the "white folks" had constantly remained there.

Before Georgia went dry it was customary for negroes of the rougher sort to get drunk in town every Saturday night. Drunken negroes would consequently be passing by, all night, on their way to their homes, yelling and (after the manner of their kind when intoxicated) shooting their revolvers in the air. Every Saturday night, when the ladies were at home, Uncle George would quietly take his gun and place himself on the porch, remaining there until the last of the obstreperous wayfarers had passed.

Uncle Abe and Uncle Wiley are two other worthy and venerable men who live in cabins on the place. Both were there when Sherman's army passed upon its devastating way, and both were carried off, as were thousands upon thousands of other negroes out of that wide belt across the State of Georgia, which was overrun in the course of the March to the Sea.

"Ah was goin' to mill wid de ox-caht," Uncle Abe told me, "when de soljas dey kim 'long an' got me. Dey [Pg 400] tol' me, 'Heah, nigga! Git out dat caht, an' walk behin'. When *it* moves *you* move; when *it* stops *you* stop!' An' like dat Ah walk all de way to Savannah [two hundred and fifty miles]. Den, after dat, dey took us 'long up No'th—me an' ma brotha Wiley, ovah deh."

I asked him what regiment he went with. He said it was the Twenty-second Indiana, and that Dr. Joe Stilwell, of that regiment, who came from a place near Madison, Indiana ("Ah reckon de town was name Brownstown"), was good to him. An officer whom he knew, he said, was Captain John Snodgrass, and another Major Tom Shay.

"All Ah was evvuh wo'ied about aftuh dey kim tuck me," he declared, "was gittin' somep'n t' eat. Dat kinda put me on de wonduh, sometahmes, but dey used us all right. Dr. Pegg—him dat did de practice on de plantation befo' de Wah—he tol' de niggas dat de Yankees would put gags in deh moufs an' lead 'em eroun' like dey wuz cattle. But deh wa' n't like dat nohow. I b'longed to de Secon' Division, Thuhd B'gade, Fou'teenth Co' [corps]. Cap'n Snodgrass, he got to be lieutenant-cuhnel. He was de highes' man Ah evuh hel' any convuhsation wid, but I *saw* all de gennuls of dat ahmy."

Uncle Wiley is older than Uncle Abe. He was already a grown man with three children when taken away by some of Sherman's men. He told me he was with the Fifty-second Ohio, and mentioned Captain Shepard.

The two brothers got as far as Washington, D. C.

"We got los' togedduh in de U. S. buildin' in dat city," [Pg 401] said Uncle Wiley. "De President of de U. S. right at dat tahme he was daid. He was kill', Ah don' s'pose it wuz a week befo' we got to Wash'n, D. C."

"How did you happen to come all the way back?" I asked.

"Well-I," ruminated the old man, "home was always a-restin' on mah min'. Ah kep' thinkin' 'bout home. So aftuh de Wah ceasted Ah jus' kim 'long back."

Many of the old plantation customs still survive. A little before noon the bell is rung to summon the hands from the cotton fields. Over the red plowed soil you hear a darky cry, a melodious "Oh-oh-oh!" as wild and musical as the cries of the south-Italian olive gatherers. The planters cease their work, mules stand still, traces are unhooked from singletrees, and chain-ends thrown over the mules' backs; then the men mount the animals and ride in to the midday meal, the women trudging after. Those who rent land, or work on shares, go to their own

cabins, while those employed by the hour or by the day (the rate of pay is ten cents an hour or seventy-five cents a day) come to the kitchen to be fed. Nor is it customary to stop there at feeding negroes. As in the old days, any negro who has come upon an errand or who has "stopped by" to sell supplies, or for whatever purpose, expects to stay for "dinner," and makes it a point to arrive about noon. Thus from sixteen to twenty negroes are fed daily at the Burge plantation house.

The old Christmas traditions are likewise kept up. On Christmas day the negroes come flocking up to the house for their gifts. Their first concern is to attempt to cry "Christmas gift!" to others, before it can be said to them—for according to ancient custom the one who says the words first must have a gift from the other.