

# Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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## **GETTING THERE— THE BEST PART OF THE VACATION**

by **George Kurz**

In the mid-1930s, the U.S. was not yet out of the Great Depression. The East Coast of Florida, particularly the Miami area, however, was actually booming as a winter vacation spot. When I was about seven years old, I learned that I would be going to Miami by train. My mother arranged with my teacher to take along my lessons. My dad arranged for reservations on the Atlantic Coast Line.

As we stood on the platform of the North Philadelphia station awaiting our train, I marveled at all the exciting things happening. Letters of the alphabet designated the various platform locations, and the redcap told us where we should wait for the particular Pullman car in which our spaces were reserved. Announcements of the trains stopping at North Philadelphia came over loudspeakers.

I eagerly awaited the appearance of our train arriving from New York, rounding the curve approaching the station. It pulled in and filled the entire length of the platform. Yes, this was the Atlantic Coast Line train to Florida, according to the loudspeaker, but it was just the first section with room enough for only half of the vacationers going that afternoon. Our car would be in the second section about ten minutes later.

I was really excited when that second section pulled in. The Pullman porter showed us to a private room, called a compartment, just for my parents and me. The train started going and gained speed so smoothly and gradually that you could barely feel any motion. The compartment had two wide, comfortable green seats facing each other, one on either side of a picture window. It felt like a little home away from home.

A separate little room, hardly bigger than a phone booth, had a sink and toilet. One spigot was labeled “Potable.” I had never seen the word before. “That water is safe to drink,”

my dad explained. “The other water is not.”

A sign by the toilet admonished, “Do not flush while train is standing in station.” Pressing the foot pedal to operate the flushing mechanism opened a metal flap at the bottom of the toilet giving direct access to the tracks below. Dad expanded on the sign. “You don’t even flush when the train is slowing down to come into a station.”

Dad took me to explore other parts of the train. We followed the corridor of our sleeping car past the other compartments. At the end of the car, he opened the heavy door, and we stepped out into the space between cars amidst a tremendous clatter. Metal parts glided over each other where two cars were coupled together. I was scared at first, but he told me to step quickly over the moving parts and into the next car. We passed through several sleeping cars. Some were just like our own with private compartments, while others had a center aisle and pairs of seats on each side separated by partitions, but not actually enclosed to form rooms.

I was enthralled. All fear of stepping from one car to the next disappeared, and I wanted to be the one to open the big doors myself. We explored as far as the dining car where my dad made us dinner reservations, then turned and headed for the back of the train. In the very last car, known as the recreation or observation car, we

could look out the back and see the railroad tracks fading off into the distance seeming to get closer and closer together. What a thrill!

Three things particularly fascinated me. The first was the recreation car where a line of seats on each side faced an empty center aisle. There were musicians and a hostess who organized games—some for kids, others for grownups. I especially recall the horseracing game. A long white mat was unrolled down the center of the car. On it, dark lines separated about eight racing lanes. Passengers could bet on different colored thin wooden horses, nearly as tall as I was. The hostess moved them along their lanes for distances determined by the roll of dice. This was a warm-up for many passengers who were anticipating betting on a real horse race or dog race for which Miami was famous.

The second was dinner in the dining car. The dining car steward was a heavysset white man in a uniform that made him look like a very important person who made sure little kids behaved properly at dinner. He showed us to a table for four. My dad wrote out our menu choices on an order slip, but otherwise the meal was just like one would expect in a very fancy restaurant, with white linen tablecloths and napkins. All the waiters were black men. They hurried back and forth between the kitchen

and the tables, carrying heavy trays and passing each other in the aisle without losing their balance even when the train swayed from side to side or suddenly lurched as it entered a curve.

At the end of the meal, our waiter cleared the table at breakneck speed. Salt and pepper shakers and a flower vase were to remain for the next seating. I sat wide-eyed as he suddenly snapped the tablecloth out from under these objects like a magician. Everything remained upright. He then proceeded to spread out a fresh tablecloth, placed the standing objects on it, and set out the silverware and napkins for the next diners. I was amazed.

But the third and biggest surprise came when we got back to our compartment. The porter had transformed our sitting room into a bedroom. He had flattened the two seats to form a wide bed. Above this, he had opened and pulled down an upper berth to form a narrow bed accessible only by a ladder. I was impressed and sought him out to watch him go through this process in another compartment while the occupants were at dinner.

Before bedtime, Dad showed me a little locker just above the floor. "Here's where you put your shoes for the night," he told me. I followed his example.

With the rocking of the train, I slept

very well. We woke up somewhere in South Carolina or Georgia, traveling through a vast forest of pine trees with long stretches without a sign of human activity. Dad and I took our shoes out of the shoe locker to discover that they had been transformed overnight. They were bright and shiny. All scuffmarks were gone. It was like magic. Later, out in the corridor, Dad showed me the little door on the other side of the shoe locker from which the porter had taken our shoes to polish them during the night.

After breakfast, my dad disappeared to another part of the train where he said there was a telephone. He needed to call his office. This puzzled me greatly. How could he call the office from a moving train? Was there some huge spool of telephone wire up on the roof with men unwinding it fast enough to keep up with the speed of the train? To this day, I'm still not sure how a telephone call could be made from a moving train in that era.

How privileged I was to have taken such trips with my parents in those years. It is sad to realize that travel by rail on the grand and luxurious scale of that era has almost completely died out in this country and the kind of experiences I had are not available to my grandchildren.

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## AT PENNSWOOD



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"If anyone's interested, I'm making four New Year's resolutions: 1. to remember the Alamo. 2. to remember the Maine. 3. to remember Pearl Harbor and 4. to remember to wear my name tag."

From time to time, *Village Voices* will be reprinting cartoons from a large collection that fellow resident Henry (Hank) Martin gave to Pennswood. He covered a variety of topics in the hundreds of cartoons he drew that appeared in *The New Yorker* and other notable publications, but the Pennswood collection is about life in this community.

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## MUSICAL NOTES

by Kay Silberfeld

At some point during my childhood, my mother and I were driving down the West Side of New York City late on a Saturday morning when,

unexpectedly, all traffic came to a standstill.

An elderly man was slowly, very slowly, shuffling his way across the wide avenue, seemingly unperturbed by his situation. The usually impatient traffic was not even honking, just waiting for him to make his unsteady way across. To our shock, we realized that this elderly man was my paternal grandfather. Most likely he was on his way to the Metropolitan Opera, having taken the train in from Newark, and was now completing the journey on foot. Helplessly, we watched his progress and were relieved when he made it to the opposite sidewalk.

The opera that afternoon was Wagner's *Meistersinger*—an opera so important to my grandfather that it was worth any effort to get there. *Meistersinger* has a special place in my father's family. Several years later, I took a cousin to hear her first *Meistersinger*. As we sat together in the Metropolitan Opera House, I experienced a strong sense of family history, particularly near the end of the overture. In a brief moment of quiet, a single note of a triangle sounds. This note was awaited by my grandfather and by other members of the family when listening to the opera.

Conversations in that family often consisted of detailed discussions about the playing of a single note or about whole passages of music. They

enjoyed comparing recent performances to ones they had heard before—sometimes many years before: remembering, analyzing and, of course, criticizing.

My grandfather had two sisters, both musicians, a pianist and a singer. One of the many tales told about them was how they, in their trips to the Met, took with them a thermos of chicken soup and some chicken sandwiches. One day as they were being shown to their seats, they became concerned about the thinness of their young usher and gave him a sandwich.

In addition to my grandfather, a rabbi who sometimes in his temple took the role of cantor, there was another brother. According to family lore, he was the most musically gifted of them all, although he never performed. He taught piano and several times told me his pencil-problem story: he needed a pencil while teaching and, invariably, left it behind. His solution was to attach a pencil to his belt. At this point in the story, he would stand up and walk around, proudly showing me how the pencil went with him.

There is another story I remember being told by my great aunts and later by my father—a fan of Mark Twain. Around the end of the 19th century, the two aunts were studying in Vienna with a musician named Theodor Leschetizky. Another student of his at the same time was Mark Twain's daughter Clara Clemens. She was in

love with, and subsequently married, fellow student Ossip Gabrilowitsch. Leschetizky, the story has it, enjoyed referring to the besotted Gabrilowitsch as suffering from “delirium Clemens.”

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## A RUBENS' LATE FAMILY PORTRAIT

by Gaby Kopelman



Rubens' late family portrait,  
Metropolitan Museum

Changes in attribution from “studio of” or “attributed to” to the master himself are rather rare, especially when it comes to the work of the great masters. But it does happen. A case in point is Rubens' late family portrait, which now hangs in the Metropolitan

Museum. The painting, formerly in the Rothschild Collection, was sold as an authentic Rubens to art dealer Daniel Wildenstein about 1980.

However, in October 1981, the College Art Association met in New York, and a whole parade of art historians passed in front of the painting then at New York's Wildenstein Gallery. Their opinions varied, but all found it more or less wanting. The figure of Rubens himself was particularly criticized as weak and not up to the standards of this great master. Altogether their verdict was rather negative.

Sometime later, sitting in my studio, I had a phone call from West Coast collector Norton Simon. He had a 24-hour reserve to buy the painting, but it was about to run out, and he had some hesitations—could I please go over to Wildenstein's and have a look at it? I, of course, would and did.

At Wildenstein's I was greeted by Harry Brooks and shown to their waiting room while some of his minions ran to fetch the painting. The waiting room's window flooded the room with light, and when the men came in carrying the painting, it just so happened that for a brief moment, the surface of the panel was struck by strong raking light. It was a significant accident, pure happenstance, because in that moment, in that light, I spotted an arch clearly outlined in relief at the

top of the painting and realized that it had started out as an arch-topped painting of Rubens' wife and child, a fact that had never been noticed before.

No wonder the figure of Rubens himself seemed somewhat weakly anchored—he had painted himself in afterwards, and this change had necessitated doing away with the arch, which clearly interfered with the sweep of Rubens' hat. When I examined the painting more closely, it was clear that Rubens had inserted his figure with the utmost care, painted himself in without ever touching the already-completed figures of wife and child. This was particularly obvious in the clever placement of his hand, painted ever so carefully around hers, giving the impression of touching, without actually doing so.

I made a diagram of this arched-top original concept, explaining it all, and gave it to Harry Brooks, assuring him that the painting was, in my opinion, absolutely right, authentically by the master himself. Needless to say, he was very pleased. As was I. (But looking back on this episode, it occurs to me that I should not have given that information to Wildenstein. After all, why give a dealer this wonderful reason to up his price?)

I then hurried home to phone Norton Simon, laying it all out for him in great detail. Unfortunately, he was not persuaded and let his reserve expire—

maybe the biggest mistake Norton Simon ever made.

A few days later, art historian Everett Fahy came to Wildenstein's with Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, a major donor to the Metropolitan Museum, to view the Rubens. Harry Brooks told Fahy of my thesis and showed him my diagram. The Wrightsman Rubens is now one of the Metropolitan Museum's major gems.

After this purchase became official, I sent my initial report to the Metropolitan Museum and asked for the x-rays of the painting, as well as some slides showing in cross section the superposition of the paint layers caused by the *pentimenti*, the artist's change in composition. I was happy to see that both the x-rays and the cross sections bore out my theory of the painting's evolution in every point.

When *Tableau*, a Dutch art journal, asked to publish my report, I first sent the text of my report and the illustrations, including the Met's x-rays and slides—these all properly credited to the Met—to the Met's curator Walter Liedtke. It seemed common courtesy. Naively, I never expected that Liedtke would resent my muscling in on what he, obviously, considered his turf. However, I was summoned to the Met and—in front of a very embarrassed Catherine Baetjer, chief curator—Liedtke tried to brow-beat me into letting him use my report in a lecture

he was to give that week. I told him that *Tableau* would be publishing my text next month, and that once it was published, he or anyone else was free to lecture on it. But not before.

This, however, wasn't good enough for Liedtke. He wanted to lecture on my report that very week, he kept on insisting. This unpleasant conversation went on for what seemed hours before he finally left, defeated. But I realized I'd made a real enemy.

*Tableau* published my article, of which this is an abbreviated version, in their Summer '83 issue, and later that year *DU*, a very upscale Swiss, magazine, gave it a really most elegant, richly illustrated publication.

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## **GLASS GEMS** by Dorothy Solomon

In my childhood, how I loved  
The wave-worn glass "gems"  
Which I tenderly "kept alive"  
In a jar of water on my dresser—  
For it was only in water  
That they glowed like  
precious stones.

Silky smooth,  
Remembering all their centuries  
of experience.  
Blessed by being immersed and  
molded and cleaned  
In the light-penetrated water,  
Having been kissed and made love to

By the “living” water,  
now deliciously warm,  
Now breathtakingly cold,  
Never isolated, they kept rubbing  
against their comrades,  
Thrown eternally shoreward—  
seaward  
By unfathomable blue volumes.

No dead dry storage for them,  
No garbage heap of broken bottles,  
No underground burial their fate,  
Only living waters to bathe in  
eternally as they  
Became ever more organic,  
more beautiful, and  
More a part of the world of nature.

Serene pale blue-green,  
Intense blue,  
Glowing amber,  
Modest white,  
And passionate red, like garnet,  
my birth stone,  
The stones were spiritually deep—  
healers.  
They were all of a piece,  
lacking ears,  
But how many crashing waves  
had it taken  
To transform them so totally  
That seeing them, one heard  
those waves again?

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## MOTHER’S STOVE

by Doug Meaker

This story was inspired by Chef Steve’s story of taking 17½ hours to reduce the meat sauce made for a Birthday Night dish.

When my mother and stepfather bought a farmhouse in southern New Hampshire, it had a large kitchen and, even though the house already had a nice, functional four-burner propane gas range, she insisted on buying and installing a large, black, cast-iron kitchen range. The firebox at one end had been up-graded to burn coal rather than wood. They started up the stove in the fall and ran it all winter.

As my mother pointed out, she could get any temperature she wanted just by the distance from the firebox. If you needed instant heat, such as hot water for tea or coffee, you just took one of the lids off the firebox and put your pan or kettle over the open flame. The heat from the fire passed under the surface of the stove and out the vent, so the temperature varied from very hot at the firebox to barely warm at the other end. She could raise her bread dough by moving it to the far end of the stove.

The process of reduction—slowly simmering a broth to evaporate the liquid without boiling or burning it—would have been a natural for such a stove; just pick the right spot across

the surface. Early chefs may have worked with similar stoves, so reduction would have come relatively easily for them.

We usually visited with our family in July (after the black fly season), so we didn't see the stove in action. But one year, we went for Christmas. As luck would have it, what was supposed to be two feet of snow turned into one foot of snow with an inch of ice as glazing. Well, the ice took down all the wires—a precarious lifeline in the best of times—so we were without power for about a week. And we got to experience the joys and woes of a good, old-fashioned winter.

The stove came into its own, provided we kept it fed and lit. With the power out, the furnace didn't work, of course, so the stove in the kitchen supplied most of the heat for the whole house, augmented by a small Franklin stove in another room. The bedrooms upstairs didn't have heat anyway, so one snuggled under warm covers at night and got dressed and downstairs—QUICKLY—in the morning to the nice, warm kitchen.

The water pump didn't work, but we had plenty of fresh water outside—as snow—to melt for drinking and cooking and to use in the bathroom. We ate and amused ourselves (chess, for instance) by candlelight. Our days tended to follow sun time rather than the usual late nights. While it was interesting going back away, we did

appreciate the return to modern conveniences.

As I look back, there were a lot of black, cast-iron stoves in the houses we rented. I don't know whether Mother picked the house because of the stove or whether it simply came with the house. But those stoves had been “modernized” by putting in kerosene burners—*not* the real thing or the real effect. New Englanders didn't throw *anything* away while it could still be used. One of my chores, when growing up, was to fill and install the five gallon glass carboys with kerosene to feed the stoves. But I hadn't been aware, until that New Hampshire stove, that Mother was really looking for the genuine article, and she finally got it.

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### **What Are the Odds?**

## **OUR ONLY HIKE**

**by Anne Baber**

When I was 16 and my sister Lynne was 12, our family lived in Westport, CT. That year, we went to Millinocket, ME, on vacation. We shared a cabin with former next-door neighbors from Wichita, KS, who had moved to Boston.

I don't think anyone in my family had ever been on a hike. (I prepared for our week in the wilds by packing 13 books to take with me to read.)

But hiking we went. We came to a large outcropping of rock. There was a bronze plaque inset into it.

It said: "S. A. Deel, Coast and Geodetic Survey, 1903" Samuel Asher Deel was our mother's father. We knew he had worked for that government agency but had no idea he was ever in Maine.

Do you have a story that defies the odds?

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## **A THOUGHT** by Jack Williams

Ten or eleven,  
On my back, on warm earth  
of late spring,  
In our back yard.  
Puffs of clouds floated by  
on a sea of blue,  
Seen through buds on the trees,  
near which I lay.

And suddenly the thought,  
fully shaped:  
This is it. This is what life really is.  
There is no more thinking:  
"When I grow up, things will  
change."  
This will not change.  
This is it.  
This is the world and I am in it.

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Paulina Brownie Wilker  
**Managing Editor:** Anne Baber  
**Contributing Editors:** Kathy Hoff,  
Ginny Lloyd, Jane Perkinson  
and Kay Silberfeld  
**Typists:** Sarah Pollock, Joanne Brown  
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**Layout:** Dick Piccolini  
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