

*Let's go to Georgia!*

## Georgia On My Mind

Thursday, April 26, 2006. It is warm out tonight as we load our bags for the short jaunt to Kemper Street Station. We are on our way to visit Sandi and Mark and their family in Watkinsville, Georgia, and Amtrak is our conveyance of choice this evening. Today it seemed as though work lasted at least fifteen hours. Why is it that the day you leave on a trip just lasts FOREVER!? *That's Kemper Street Station below:*



According to the computer report, our train is due in Lynchburg a couple of minutes before 10 PM. Well, guess what --- the station agent tells us it is about 45 minutes late now. A Trailways bus is waiting in the parking lot for 46 people who have been visiting Washington DC and the driver raids the vending machine before he settles down for a long wait for his passengers.

10:58 PM and we are finally rolling southward. Engines 13 and 3 are leading the way and our home for the next 9 hours is coach number 25040. We chat with a friendly young attendant. His shift is New Orleans to New York, then back again to New Orleans. He rents a home in New Orleans but owns a house in Detroit. Hurricane Katrina rebuilding is very much the topic tonight. He also tells us that there are 200 kids in the coaches behind us, going to Greenville, SC. Jim has his scanner running with earphones and is enjoying the conversations of the train crew and dispatchers.

The gal across the aisle is friendly and we talk a long time about education and family and history and writing journals. She is a very special young lady and time seems to fly by. She and her family are from New York City, on their way to her grandpa's funeral in Mississippi.

The train sways and rocks and soon lulls us to sleep. Amtrak supplies us with a couple of pillows. We have also brought along a couple of our own plus a blanket so comfort is ours.

Before we know it, the sky is getting light and people are beginning to move around. The PA announces that the dining car is open for breakfast. Jim heads that way for some hot coffee. We have carried our own snacks but that coffee is much desired this morning. I fold up our blanket and start to organize our bags for Gainesville, Georgia, the next stop. A call to Sandi reveals that she is about fifteen minutes from the station, too.

Outside our windows the world is coming to life. School buses are all over the place and industrial sites are humming with activity. We are now stopped in the “middle of nowhere” to meet an oncoming freight train and we have the opportunity to drink in the gorgeous early morning view. Fresh white dogwoods and red buds are sprinkled throughout the woods. A small creek bubbles over stones as Nature wakes for another of God’s precious days. Wispy spring-awakened underbrush looks like pale green lace ruffled beneath the massive Georgia Pines. Oh, yes! It is going to be a good, good day!

Amtrak 19 pulls into the Gainesville, Georgia, facility about an hour late and we eagerly clamber down the steps where Sandi and Morgan stand waiting for us. Jim has his camera in action when he sees a convention of locomotives parked near the station.



Eventually, we head out for Watkinsville after a stop at one of the schools in Sandi’s district. One of her physical therapy patients is having trouble with his wheel chair and she makes a service call to fix it. Jim, Morgan, and I sit in the parking lot of the school and watch as late-arriving little kids carry empty Easter baskets into the school. Looks like there is an egg hunt scheduled for later today.

Once we reach Watkinsville, Mark greets us with the info that we are under a tornado watch. The threatening sky seems to agree. Morning passes in a hurry as we sit in Mark's office and enjoy the business of being a family, catching up on each other's lives.



Sandi and Mark make the trip to the car rental place to pick up a van so they, Jim and I, and Mark's dad, Harold, and beloved Ola can travel together to Atlanta tonight. Four PM...everybody is ready, the baby sitter has arrived to watch the kids, and Mark herds the rental van westward. John Boy's Restaurant provides a really good buffet supper and six stuffed people are ready for the evening.

The Atlantic Civic Auditorium is teeming with people when we get there. The parking lots fill up fast and buses are unloading throngs of people at the door. We find our reserved seats and the Passion Play begins. This is the thirtieth year it has been produced by First Baptist Church of Atlanta. Charles Stanley is the pastor there. These folks put on a marvelous performance with lots of brilliant color, incredible scenery and backdrops, inspirational music, and special effects. It finishes with the entire audience on its feet for the Halleluiah Chorus. I will remember it always!

The trip back to Watkinsville is pleasant with conversation about tonight's play and life in general. Harold and Ola are such special people. They graciously volunteer to take home the baby sitter. Soon the lights are out and that bed feels awfully good despite the fact that the tornado watch is still in effect.

Saturday morning, April 8, dawns gray with rain and some "thunder bumpers". Mark leaves before 10AM to photograph a wedding today. His job starts as the wedding party arrives at the

hair dressers and will continue until the reception is over late tonight. Sandi and I return the rental van while Jim keeps an eye on the kids. Along the way I spot every wisteria in this town. Especially beautiful is one very tall Georgia Pine that is completely cloaked in the lavender flowers from top to bottom.

Sandi and I spend most of the afternoon assembling two albums with 625 proofs from a wedding two weeks ago. The newly-weds are due to pick them up at 4 and we finish just in time.

At 5 the sun is shining so Sandi, Justin, Morgan, Jim and I are on the move again, this time to the Georgia State Botanical Gardens in Athens. This 313 acre park is owned by the University of Georgia and is unbelievably beautiful. There are 5 miles of nature trails plus numerous gardens. The tall glass Visitors' Center (*pictured below*) has a 3-story conservatory.



But we walk the myriad paths which lead us beside hundreds of flowers and bushes. The colors are gorgeous with a kazillion azalea in profuse bloom. Two weddings are in progress here this afternoon and I can't think of a prettier setting for a marriage ceremony.



McDonalds drive-through yields Happy Meals for Justin and Morgan, then we go across the street to Zaxby's for chicken for the adults. Those kids may have run off a lot of energy at the gardens, but they still have plenty left to keep Zaxby's lively!



Back at Sandi's home, the phone is ringing and it is my friend, Sue Pickett from Monroe, Wisconsin. She and Bill are in Lynchburg tonight and are staying with Freddie and Cindy. Our schedules did not mesh, but we hope to meet in July. Sue and I chat at length. I miss that lady so much! We have the kind of friendship that sets us to yakking for hours when we do get together and it always seems as though we have been touching bases more often. This has been going on for well over 20 years. Her son Jason, now a daddy with two little girls of his own, was just a toddler when we first met. *That's young Jason below:*



Harold and Ola are back just in time for Sandi's home-churned vanilla ice cream. And Ola brought fresh strawberries! We sit at the table and solve all the world's problems as we indulge in the sweet treats. Calories don't count when you are on vacation, do they?

Don't you just know, Sunday morning brings glorious sunshine? Breakfast of sausage and muffins gets us in gear before we attend Briarwood Baptist Church with Sandi and Mark and their kids. The church is full this morning but my mind is free-wheeling as usual. I am transported back to July 22, 1989, and I see a radiant bride (Sandi) walking down the aisle to meet her groom. Pastor Dan is standing there, as are little Christopher and Danielle.

My family and Sis Marion are there, too.



Ah, such tender memories these are.....but, in reality, this is 2006 and I must pay attention to Pastor Dan's sermon.....



This afternoon Sandi, Jim, and I invade Wal-Mart. I need new tops and Sandi is my personal shopping advisor. We laugh until the tears flow while fitting personal garments as Jim waits patiently a ways away. I think he knows better than to get involved in this episode. Success is ours.....and the new blouses don't look all that bad either.

Sandi and the kids go to AWANA at 5. Mark and Jim surf the net and “talk cameras”, then Mark fires up the grill and has burgers ready when Sandi, Justin, and Morgan come home. Soon it is time to pack our bags and collect enough hugs to last until the next time we see the grandkids.

The computer shows our train is running an hour and a half late so Sandi delivers us to Gainesville, then heads back home. She has to work tomorrow. Now we wait for Amtrak 20 ----- . We chat with several people who are also waiting. One lady is from Albany, New York. Her husband is an Amtrak employee so she makes frequent trips all over the country. Another lady is going home to New York City.

Eleven-o-six PM and our train, pulled by locomotives 45 and 47, is moving. There are very few passengers in coach 50018 and most of them are asleep. Jim and I soon join that status. I am aware of people getting on and off during the night but, mostly, we are both zonked out.

Life begins to stir around us about daylight. Jim finds hot coffee for us and we snack on more cereal bars as we enjoy the beauty of southern Virginia. Frost on the pastures glistens in the spectacular sunrise. Familiar landscapes come into view and we are almost home.

Soon the conductor notifies us that the next stop is Lynchburg and we gather our belongings. As we wait for our chariot of steel to stop, the two ladies from New York pass by us, on their way to the dining car, and we share a final “Good Bye”.

It is 7:15 AM on April 10. We drive through the sun-drenched streets and are happy to be home. Trips are great fun but home is every bit as special.

