

## Sidetracked: Travels Across the Undiscovered South

Gary Mitchell  
Luvenre, Alabama

I am living in the house my mom and dad brought me home from the hospital. It was my grandmother's house. I left for a while for work but mostly I've been here. My family goes back several generations. My family is very close because my brother and sister married a brother and sister. I have a lot of close relatives from both sides of the family.

I went to Alabama Christian College. It was a two-year college and then I went to Tuscaloosa and finished up there. I was planning to go to med school. I had the grades and everything, but much to my family chagrin, I decided eight more years of school was not for me. I came back here and eventually moved to Atlanta for a job with the Social Security Administration.



When I moved to Atlanta, well actually I didn't want to leave home. But it was a good job. It was exciting. I travelled all over the southeast. I thought I would be there for awhile. But I got tired of the hustle and bustle. The traffic in Atlanta was horrible. We've got bad traffic here on the weekends, but not like Atlanta.

The traffic is a thing that we have fought. I work with the Chamber of Commerce on the Board. We had a little group called the Downtown Merchants Association and I worked with them for a while. We were really trying to redevelop downtown — there are so many empty buildings. The traffic keeps businesses from being able to function. It's a Catch-22. We want people to come into town, but we want them to stop. When people are in that line of traffic, they don't want to get out because I can't get back in. It's awful.

I liked the job with Social Security in Atlanta. I got to interact with people who were struggling. My heart — my whole life has been has been in helping people.

Mom and dad we're getting older and I just decided to come back home. They had a little store here in town, the Western Auto and I came back and help.

Later, my mom, dad I went into a horrible situation of raising chickens. We had eight chicken houses. We had 750,000 chickens a year. I worked with that for a good while. Eventually, I got a job with the Department of Human Resources for the state of Alabama. That's where I worked until I retired in 2011.

I never really thought about moving away when I retired. I didn't want to have a house payment because this house is paid for. I'm close to everything. We can go to the beach if we want to. If we want to go to the mountains, we have a house up there. If we want to go to New Orleans, we go.

There are a lot of people I don't know around here. When my dad had the Western Auto, I knew everybody in the county, just about. But I don't know that many people, anymore. I know their grandparents probably, or people I grew up with. But, the younger generation I don't know.

Luverne used to be a really bustling town. On Fridays and Saturdays, you couldn't get a parking place. We had three red lights instead of the two we have now. There was a lot of activity — we had all kinds of stores. You don't see that anymore. The downtown stores struggle. We have some good stores downtown but not the variety that you would need to have a really good functioning downtown area. That is one of the main things I've seen.

There hasn't been a lot of change. We have not grown. We haven't shrunk it either. We're always around 2400 people.

We had a lot of industry back in the day. There were textiles, but they've all gone. That took a lot of jobs away — especially for women. There's not been a lot of industry to come in and take the place of that until Hyundai came, the automobile industry. They have one of their factories here.

The big box stores over in Troy and Montgomery put a lot of people out of business. A lot of the automotive parts businesses were downtown. Everything was downtown. The only thing south of town was a drive-in theater in the couple of restaurants — maybe a gas station or two. It's not like that today.

I've always been interested in art. When I retired in 2011, I just started painting. I've never had any art classes. I use acrylics — it's easier to clean up. I love oils because you can get all kinds of affects with them but they are a mess. I'm a messy person as it is.

I started out painting at home on my bed. My comforter eventually looked like a piece of art, itself. It was awful. I had so many paintings at home — I had them on the floor, in the living room, in the bedroom, everywhere. I decided I would have to rent a storage shed or find some place to put the stuff. So I found this little shop here. I've always liked this place. It used to be a service station.

I still painted it home. But, I just brought my art down here to display. I was open Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings. But it got to the point that I did not keep regular hours. Now, I'm open when I'm here.

I'm not a real big fan of commissions because I want to paint what I want to paint. I like whimsical themes. I have done several little houses and cabins. They seem to sell really well. They have a *Grandma Moses* sort of feel to them. I do some etchings on the paintings, too. I like to do that scratch some of the pain away to reveal the color and texture underneath.

Luverne has had an arts and craft shows in the past. We use to have one every year that the Chamber of Commerce sponsored. They've approached me about putting some of my art in there — having my own booth and space.

But, let me tell you about having shows. I am so insecure. I went over to the Troy festival one year, and there was a guy there that had his artwork and I'm sure he was very proud of it. But, there was no one at his booth. And I said right there, "I will not be that guy sitting right there where is no one coming in. It would be so embarrassing." I went and bought something from him just so he would've sold something.

I've written three books. I started writing back in the 1970s. A friend of mine read one of my books and said, "What drugs were you on when you wrote this?" It's a Stephen King-kind of book. Crazy. It's a novel.

I worked for the Department of Human Resources for 27 years. I worked in child welfare — child abuse investigations, foster care and adoptions. It takes special people to do that job. I told myself, before I took it, “You’re not bringing it home.” I did the best I could. Of course, I was on call a lot of time. But I did not go home and be consumed by it. I had a friend that every time she would go out and visit her families, she would come home and cry for two hours. I told her that you’re not going to last long if you bring this home.

I would have to tell myself, that this was just a job. You cannot do your job well if you’re consumed by it.

I don’t know if that’s being coldhearted or what. But you have to do that.

I’ve always had a passion, my whole life, of helping the downtrodden. I’m very concerned about people who are lacking. Even when I was in school at the university, we had a lot of children in the neighborhood who were just starved for attention. When I came back for my job in Atlanta, I worked with my church as a youth minister. We did a lot of benevolence work there, as well. So it’s always been, as a Christian or good person, you need to reach out to those in need.

I miss some of the things in the big city, but you know what? As long as I have a vehicle that’ll run, and I can go wherever I want to get those needs met. I don’t think I would want to live in the city.

If you want some things you have to go out of town. In our town here, there are no good men’s clothing stores. You have some of the dollar stores, but if you want really good quality clothing, you have to go out of town. That’s inconvenient. We used to have two or three stores downtown that offered a wide variety of clothing for men and women and children. I miss those. What happened I think, is that they have to charge much higher price.

We’re blessed with a lot of restaurants and eating places for town this size. We have a hospital, doctors, dentist, and all of that. Just the inconvenience of shopping is probably the main thing.

I think we have some people that are forward thinking. I would like to see our population growth. But there’s a lot of people who don’t. They like it just like it is.