



New Year's 2011 & Georgia Blog

by Dallas Smith

Goodbye to 2010

As during the past ten years or so, I worked New Year's Eve 2010 at a Reno casino with a ten-piece band, "The World's Most Dangerous Party Band". We played for two dinner seatings of "high rollers", i.e. casino visitors who deposit the requisite minimum amount of money into their gaming (gambling) accounts. Casinos don't care if a particular customer wins or loses...they just have to gamble. Because when they gamble, the odds favoring the "house" (casino) will prevail, and so overall the casinos consistently rake in the money.



The World's Most Dangerous Party Band and New Year's Revelers

Observing Reno's Homeless

New Year's Day, in sharp contrast to the night before, Susan and I played an informal concert for the Reno Homeless Women's Shelter. I knew that this and related facilities serving the poor existed in Reno, but I had never visited them before. It turns out that they are located a mere ten minute drive from the relatively affluent neighborhood where Susan and I live. There is a gated entrance, which is guarded 24 hours a day. (In part, this is because some women are escaping abusive men who might wish to do them physical harm.) The shelter contains seventeen sparsely furnished rooms. Some of the women are pregnant. Others are accompanied by as many as four young children. These mothers and their children are allowed to stay for as long as six months, though the average stay is 3-4 months.

From the top floor of the women's shelter, one could see Reno's homeless "tent city". I was reminded of the squatter slums in India. The tents are located in a lot just next to the Reno's busy railroad tracks. It was shocking to think that, at this time of year, approximately forty people were living in tents, around which the ground between the tents is covered by snow. I was told that during the summer, the tent city reached its maximum capacity of two hundred residents. Local churches and other civic organizations regularly provide free meals to the poor. On this new year's day, approximately fifty men were lined up for free hamburgers being cooked by church men dressed in heavy jackets to ward off the cold winds. There is also a "store" which takes in donations of clothing, which are then distributed freely to the poor and homeless.

I was pleased to learn that several government agencies work to help the homeless individuals get their lives together, which includes helping them to get off drugs, helping them to improve their appearances (and thus their potential employability), and helping them find safe places to live outside the homeless shelter. It was very curious to me that I observed that almost all the poor men waiting in line for the free meal were smoking cigarettes. It is a testament to the fact that nicotine addiction is so strong that these poor people would prefer to use their last dollars to keep themselves supplied with cigarettes, perhaps even before paying for food.



Susan poses with four Women's Shelter children

Georgia on my mind

A few days after new-year's day in Reno, Susan and I flew into Atlanta, renting a car, and driving one hundred miles southwest to my old hometown of Columbus, Georgia. My parents and all my uncles are gone. But I have four surviving aunts (all in their 80's) and lots of cousins. My custom during my yearly visits is to host a lunch for my relatives at a local barbeque restaurant. (As I've mentioned in previous blogs, for my taste, Georgia has the best barbeque in the world.) These lunches allow me to see as many of my aunts and cousins at one time as possible. Otherwise, I wouldn't have sufficient time to visit them all individually. It's bittersweet to see the markers of advanced age among my aunts. Everyone is coping as well as could be hoped. Confronting aging and death requires philosophical negotiations with oneself.

We stayed in Columbus for only three full days this trip. I visited my old homestead, the Alabama farm. I've had wonderful tenants living there for several years. They have made the place look better than it did when I lived there. Ten years after leaving the farm, there are still some lingering signs of my parents' presence. For instance, in the workshop is my father's extensive tool collection. The workshop has become the repository for my father's law book collection (these days court case records are published on CD-ROM's) as well as his general library. I perused his library, reminded again of his broad interests as evidenced by the wide range of subjects in his book collection. I certainly inherited his general curiosity about many things, but I just don't have the time in the context of my current lifestyle to read as many books as he did.



The farmhouse where I grew up and the lake

Another high point of the visit was a jazz performance in a local Columbus night club. It was an opportunity to play again with my musical friends, with whom I have played sporadically since the late 70's...over three decades! The guys had gotten together twice in advance of my visit to rehearse my compositions. So when I joined them for our single rehearsal together, they were already "up to speed". I then introduced two more new pieces of mine that we had never played together before. The performance the next night was well attended and ended with a

gratifying standing ovation. Our next performance together in Columbus will be September 11, 2011, for the monthly guest performance sponsored by the Columbus Jazz Society. For this auspicious anniversary, I'll be featuring songs of peace (through music).



On stage at The Loft (the big gig)

Sylvester, Georgia

After our three days in Columbus, we drove a hundred miles southeast to visit my 89-year-old aunt who lives in the small farm town of Sylvester, Georgia. One drives through Southern farm country, dominated by cotton fields and pecan tree orchards. I've driven this route many times during my life, first with my parents, and more recently on without them. It's always interesting to see the changes in the local landscapes over the years. The cities show much new construction and development. However, some of the small towns have changed very little over the past fifty years of my driving through them.

This aunt is my mother's older sister. I'm writing these words on the nine-year anniversary of my mother's death. Again, the visit was bittersweet. We looked at old photos of my parents, as well as my aunt's two deceased husbands. Several of my cousins joined us for the evening with my aunt. One of my cousins in Sylvester is a professional peanut inspector. As in the past, I brought him pistachios and walnuts from California, and he gave me fresh Georgia pecans and peanuts.

A Holocaust Survivor's Stories

After Sylvester, we drove for three hours north back to Atlanta. There we visited a 98-year-old cousin of Susan's, named Steve, who was born in Hungary. Despite his fragile physical condition, Steve is still mentally sharp. He was handicapped by the fact that he had somehow lost his hearing aid, and his natural hearing ability was sharply impaired. Even shouting to him, he only could understand a portion of what was said to him. Nonetheless, he told stories of growing up in Budapest, meeting Susan's mother (also born in Hungary) at a very young age, leaving Budapest for Detroit in the United States in 1938, which was before the Germans invaded Hungary and committed their mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, and gays.

He told one story that Susan had never heard him tell before. When the Nazis occupied Budapest, they started deporting Jews to concentration camps and eventual extermination. All Budapest Jews were required to assemble in the streets. Those who were young and healthy enough to work were taken away to the camps. Steve's mother, who was still relatively young during the war, had the brilliant foresight to use makeup to make herself appear old and sickly. Thus, she was spared from being taken away with other women of her age. She survived the war. Steve related that when the Western Allies bombed the Germans occupying Budapest, his mother looked out her apartment window, saying, "I don't care if the bombs kill me. It's okay if they destroy all of Budapest, as long as they kill the Nazis."

Snow in Atlanta

We checked into a hotel near the Atlanta airport with all news outlets warning of an impending storm. This storm threatens to be the largest snowstorm since 1982. Just as predicted, the snow began to fall in the early evening. By morning, the city had received five inches or more of snow. But more importantly, the snow changed to freezing rain. Freezing rain occurs when warm moist air flows over colder air and the ground below. Rain begins to fall as liquid precipitation, but upon hitting the ground it freezes, coating everything in a layer of ice. The accruing ice breaks tree limbs, causing power cables to snap, and creates dangerous roads. That is what Atlanta and much of the South is dealing with today. Most flights in and out of Atlanta have been cancelled today. Our scheduled flight for tomorrow has been cancelled. So we are forced to stay another night in Atlanta. If we're lucky, we will make it out day after tomorrow, flying via Cincinnati to Los Angeles, in order to drive from LA to Santa Barbara for the annual session of the Fielding Graduate University. Susan is hard at work on her dissertation and plans to graduate at the Fielding Summer Gathering in July. Another blog will follow from Santa Barbara...assuming we arrive according to plan.



Barred Owl at the Alabama Farm