

Observations

By J. W. Henson

I love to travel alone! Not really alone, but with no one that I know. Incognito!! It is not that I wish to do naughty things, for I am too old to play those games. It is just that I am free to move about . . . free as the wind. I can assume any role that I am capable of carrying out with no embarrassment to a companion. I am free to observe and to be observed. I occupy my travel time by observing and writing in my journal.

On this particular morning I went into the restroom after having arrived in the Atlanta air terminal. There was a man standing before the urinal busily complaining aloud about the dangers of being constrained by a seat belt with a full bladder. He was talking to no one in particular, just expressing his private opinion in public.

At a distance I followed him along the corridor to make a concourse change. He eyed all he passed and was ready to add a casual remark to any who looked his way. He was walking faster than I and was soon out of sight. He bypassed the turn-off to the trains, and corrected his course just in time to meet me at the head of the down escalator.

“I’ve never flown before”, he remarked, “and I am amazed at the size of this air station!” I thought he must have meant bus port, but didn’t comment. There was no question who he was talking to now.

“On the plane, I was afraid I would never find the front door to the air station”, he continued. But just as the airplane stopped a big gentleman hopped up and headed off in a rush. Now, I say to myself, “That man knows where the front door is, and he is making for it!”

“I fell into his wake and after a fast walk he turned down a corridor and into the restroom. I decided right there and then that I would never rely on anyone else to lead me to the front door.”

We had reached the bottom of the escalator at this point in his story, and in parting he said, “It’s a frightful big place!” and was off at his usual fast gait.

In Atlanta I had told the little girl at the Delta desk that this was one trip that I was in no hurry and that if they had overbooked I would be a good prospect to step down and wait until later. She thanked me and said, “Overbooking is not one of our problems on this flight. There are plenty of empty seats!”

I saw that she was right. First class was sparsely seated, but in one corner sat Little Richard. I was shocked, but upon reflection decided that STARS have to get around just like real people. He looked over at me and said, “It’s a beautiful day, man!” I made an amicable nod of agreement and proceeded giving no indication that I recognized him for

more than just a regular man.

A passenger behind me said as we moved on, "Don't you know that that was Little Richard."

Back over my shoulder I commented, "I doubt that he recognized me either!"

Well, they stuffed a huge fellow in the seat next to me so that it became difficult to determine where my rights began and his ended. In fact it was difficult to tell whose body parts were where. So I suggested to the first stewardess who came by that if one of us could take an empty seat the flight would be more comfortable.

She said, "Take your choice of empty seats since there are a lot of them." The behemoth caught the point and relocated to the back of the plane!

A high-pressure system dominated the flow of the weather and the flight was clear and smooth as the plane proceeded toward Tucson. From my perch at 37,000 feet I was free to study the terrain of the land below me. I calculated that we were traveling one sixth of a mile per second, roughly 1000 feet, and by using the frame of the window I could count seconds and arrive at the length of any object on the ground that lay parallel to our direction of travel.

The eastern part of our country is filled with natural meandering streams mostly running north to south, or perpendicular to our course of travel. I studied the oxbows in their course, and could see places where the swollen stream had cut across the neck of the oxbow to form an island or to leave a filled dry bed behind. The Army's Corp of Engineers is always meddling with nature, considering nature too slow and ineffective when left to itself. A nudge from the Corp seems to serve man's purpose better. I was sure that the eastern states had enough streams, and I would recommend that the Corp issue no more CON's (Certificates of Need) for that purpose. They would do well to turn their attention to the parched west, and provide them with more streams.

We flew across the Tom Bigbee Waterway. I remember when it was being debated in Congress. A certain element referred to it as a 'Pork Barrel Project' because they did not get as large a slice of the public pie for their State, to correct the inefficiencies of nature. I wonder how nature ever made out before man came along to its assistance.

Today the Tom Bigbee is like TV, air conditioning, and the motor car, it is no longer a luxury, it has become a necessity.

After crossing the Mississippi River I had to begin studying the roads since streams had become so scarce. In the old days men built the roads to conform with the terrain, just as nature would have done had she been in the transportation business. Not so today! When the construction people come to an obstacle they either tunnel through it, bridge over it, or gouge it out of the way. They don't go around it.

There are so many roads that start and terminate nowhere in the New Mexico desert. However, how would they have known there was nothing out there had they not built a road out to it?

I ate breakfast before leaving home, and sat down to a cup of coffee and a hot roll in Atlanta to pass the time away. One of the first things they did on the airplane was to roll out a breakfast replete with coffee. Well, somewhere over the New Mexico desert I had a call to visit the lavatory.

I remember the old toilets on trains. When you flushed them you could see the crossties going by beneath you. The airplane has improved on this. You can no longer see the ground when you flush the device. They even have a container that holds all the waste until at a safe place to dump it. Gone are the chickens that rushed upon the tracks at the passing train to see what might have gotten dropped from the toilets. If it were like the old days it would be a hazard to be a farmer peacefully working his fields below. Before anything of substance reached the ground the airplane would be out of sight and sound, and leave the farmer to ponder some large overhead bird.

I remember once under, extreme bouncy conditions in the lavatory, trying to hold on and still be efficient, that I was thrown about the small cubicle. That is where I discovered that the water on the floor, walls, and mirror didn't come from the wimpy little faucet above the washbasin. I consider that to be one of the most unsanitary places in the world, and did not wash my hands before exiting, having touched nothing nasty except the door handle.

In Los Angeles there was a small, solemn, worried looking man and his wife. She was obviously the dominated type. He took care of all the business, and was continually consulting the departure monitors and the people at the desk to determine when the flight for Tucson was to depart. The wife clearly had all the intelligence in the family and he possessed all of the concern. At last since there was no one guarding the loading ramp, he took her by the arm and started for the plane. I sat watching. All of a sudden here they came back much faster and more concerned looking than when they had entered. All of this stress had taken its toll on him, and leaving her seated he went for the restroom, and to acquire a bite to eat (in two different locations, I hope). Just as he left they began loading the plane. The wife sat nonchalantly watching the passengers load. We were all seated and the doors were just about to be closed when here they came, him in front and her dutifully in his brilliant wake. After all the worry and concern they nearly missed the flight, and I am sure it reinforced within him the need to be eternally vigilant when you are about to catch a plane.

Well, I arrived in Tucson in time to attend church with my daughter. There appears to be no concern in the Church that having the cute little children going up and down the aisles gathering money from the worshipers might make beggars of them. The practice is prevalent even in Tucson. The children there carry small wicker baskets lined inside with purple velvet, and held securely by an arched handle above.

A small swarthy, brunette girl about eight years of age approached me with her basket. Instead of dropping a coin into the basket, I held my hand out with the palm up. She reached into the basket, in an uncertain, timid manner, and placed a quarter in my hand. There was a roar of laughter from the rear seats of the church and I returned the coin, remarking to myself, "Well, it's for heathens, anyway!"

When I am traveling I certainly do enjoy observing others, and I am sure they get a kick out of watching me. It's all in good fun!