

A Day on the Trail

by Rebecca Bauer

My traveling partner, photographer Anthony Scarlati, and I like to take the path less beaten. We are always looking for new possibilities outside of our urban sprawl. So for us this 84-mile drive down the Old Tennessee Trail was of particular interest. This quickly became a trip of real life and whispers of life from years gone by. There were no replicas, only carefully renovated originals. No bright lights or tourist ensemble. No superficial attempts to go back in time. It was authentic, and anyone traveling these roads will discover this place just as we did—very real and very alive.

We can certainly say we loved Franklin and Leiper's Fork for all their glory. We loved Nett's Grocery; we loved finding the Zion Presbyterian Church surrounded by a stunning cemetery. We loved the pastures graced with horses and quiet areas where time stood still. Anthony loved the locals who happily obliged to have him "make their picture," and I fell in love with the Civil War story of Major Patrick Cleburne.

The Mt. Pleasant Grill sits at the southern anchor of the Trail. The food, the stories, the waitresses, the history on the walls and the graciousness of our host, Tim Porter, were all enchanting. And it was here we began to cross the threshold into the age of Polk.

Moving up the pike, the pinnacle of this trip was an open door to St. John's Episcopal Church—a shrine open to the public only once a year. Walking through the old iron gate onto the front lawn, I was stopped in my tracks by the most beautiful cedar tree, standing tall and magnificent against the blue sky. I wondered about its age, as it looked old enough to have witnessed the Polk clan during their church visits. Entering through the front door, we found the air musty, the walls stark, and the floors dark, and an echo rang of our footsteps. We were standing where hundreds of whites and slaves intermixed elbow to elbow on Sunday.

Dawson Gray, secretary and vice president of the board of directors of St. John's Episcopal Church (Ashwood), kindly gave us the tour and small lecture. He told the tale of Major General Patrick Cleburne riding up on his horse and stopping by the very same tree I had admired. And he recited the General's famous remark: "This is the most beautiful and peaceful spot I ever beheld. It is almost worth dying to be buried in such a beautiful spot." This was a man who sided with the South, not because he supported slavery but because of his love for the Southern people who had adopted him as one of their own. He was a man well respected, a hero who would never marry his fiancé because he died five days later at the Battle of Franklin. He was then buried at St. John's. His final resting place is in Helena, Arkansas.



We were immersed in our walk through the Confederate cemetery and stilled by the marker that read, "Mammy Sue—January 24, 1873—To ever trust the tender loving nurse of the eleven children of George and Sally Polk." And what a treat it was for me to climb the bell tower and pull the rope as the bell tolled over Mt. Pleasant!

We relished a delicious meal at Stan's Restaurant on Highway 46. Linda, who has been serving there for 18 years, offered a friendly, "So, where you headed," and we were strangers turned friends.

On the Columbia town square we found Ted's Sporting Goods store where a 1920s cash register still cha-chings. We asked why the sign hangs upside down outside and learned that the story is buried with the original owner.

Suburban development aside, we took in the movement of the Civil War via plantation homes and battlefields, including that of Cleburne into the last days of his life. My appreciation for the history was awakened, and I seemed to have gained a personal attachment for the General. Our journey ended amongst the afterlife of the Franklin-Nashville Campaign. I was reminded of those who came before us and of the rich history they left behind. Anthony was moved by those he met along the way and was reminded why he now calls Tennessee home. It appears that this Trail hit us both in the heart. 



PHOTOS: ANTHONY SCARLATI