

Vol. 2: A Friend in Franklin

BY REBECCA BAUER | PHOTO BY ANTHONY SCARLATI

As always, summer seemed to pass a little too quickly, and a mild one it was for Tennessee. The beautiful weather was exactly the sort that makes travelling a scenic road so alluring. Our journey continues from the northern end of the Natchez Trace, and we wonder what we'll find that speaks to our rural mission.

We discover an unmarked turnoff where a winding lane ends at a breathtaking overlook. Before us sits a panorama of hills and a valley painted with farms and roads. We note mile marker 438, the first left turn from entering the Trace and a spot no map has revealed.

We take the next exit at Birdsong Hollow, which holds a stunning bridge with concrete double arches, towering 155 feet high and over 1600 feet long above the picturesque valley and State Route 96. Built in 1994, the award-winning structure was the first segmentally constructed concrete arch bridge in the United States.

We head toward Franklin, and though the historic downtown is rich in 200 hundred years of history, Civil War chronicles and Main Street experiences, we find ourselves pulled first to the Farmers Market at the Factory at Franklin.

We arrive at the Factory at Franklin (circa 1929) where the beautifully renovated complex's 11 buildings once housed Dortch Stoveworks, Jamison Bedding and Magic Chef. Where hundreds of hands once labored in production lines, there now exist boutique shop owners, chefs and artists at work in modern spaces.

Outside, we're welcomed by the sounds of bluegrass music resonating over a thick crowd. Ah, the camaraderie of a farmers market. We stroll through aisles of covered stands, the scene fresh and delectable. Vegetables are laid out on rectangular tables lined one after the other, voices are conversing, money trading and everything is natural and local: grass-fed beef, organic produce, homemade honey, goat cheese, artisan breads, hand-knitted clothing, original artwork. All are touched, held and smelled by the visiting marketers who have come out, many with children and canine companions in tow. Eyeing the variety of dog breeds was, in itself, entertaining. We cross paths with two little blond-headed sisters, mouths full and fingers sticky from munching on homegrown cucumber and watermelon. What a refreshing change from the all-too common sight of children sporting junk food.

We spot the source of the music: a five-piece band belting Appalachian classics. They're known as the Franklin Square Pickers. A couple members wear a little age on them, one strums his "banjer," as he likes to call it, another says he has been pickin' guitar for nearly 70 years. They're accompanied by a young fiddle player who could keep up with the best of them.

One vendor, Ronda Friend, really strikes a chord with us.

She is selling her self-penned children's books. Her vivacious smile and energy is inviting, her books feature eye-catching illustrations. Her purpose is to share with children the lessons she learned from a simpler life. It's all based on her memories of growing up on the aptly named Friendly Acres, her childhood family farm.

Perusing her books, we find amusing words and messages. *Hats Off to Heroes* bestows lessons in kindness and spotlights her father, a WWII Bronze Star recipient. The family grew all their own food and gave much of it away. "He was a giver," Ronda says of her father. *Time Out at Home* tells tales of patience while *Panic in the Pigpen* deals in the wisdom of a grandmother who never complained, and persevered despite the rough cards life handed her. Accompanying these stories are songs, poems and recipes instilling important values cultivated from country life.

Friend's mission is "to reach children's hearts and minds by sowing seeds of a different kind," namely, seeds of character. Inspired by the loss of a close friend and symbolized by the sunflower, Ronda created Sunflower Seeds Press, successfully molding her love of rural life and a long career working with children into her tales. She brings her accounts to life through storytelling and audience participation in schools around the country. "We laugh, we cry, because some stories are about losing ones we love," Ronda says. "With children it not only touches their hearts, but they will say, 'I'm learning a lesson.'"

Friend speaks proudly of her life on the farm – shucking the sweetest corn, pulling peas from the pod, baby calves being born, fresh strawberry pie. "We grew everything we ate and never wasted a thing," she remembers. "We ate every leftover and rarely had a bag of trash. What trash we did have we burned. And we made homemade soap out of lard from baking grease." Her most savored scent? "I remember the smell of the sheets from hanging outside on the line. Downy couldn't hold a candle to that." And there were lots of animals – cows, chickens, rabbits, horses, sheep, you name it. It's the quiet of the country, Friend ascertains, that fed her young mind its stories and sparked her creativity.

As our conversation ends, we are inspired by Ronda Friend's outlook: "I see rural America and the families trying to provide and teach simple ways of life, the values and morals; I have great hope in our future because of those parents."

Join us next time as we delve into eclectic small town charm and a heap of storytellin'.

Rebecca Bauer and Anthony Scarlati are the publishers of *Natchez100Journal.com*, providing a unique and artistic portrayal of the communities and culture along the 100 miles of the Natchez Trace in Tennessee.

For more information on Ronda Friend and Sunflower Seeds Press, visit www.rondafriend.com and www.downonfriendlyacres.com.