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Culture Shock

BY
SCOTT KORB

In the summer of 1961, my grandfather Ralph Borchardt moved his family from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to northeast Florida to run a motel called the Starke Motor Court. Recently, I discovered a postcard from the motel for sale on the internet that calls the family business “Starke’s leading court,” with two fine restaurants adjacent and a cheery yellow stripe running the length of the building, breaking up the white siding of my grandparents’ twenty-five w/w-carpeted units. It’s pleasant to imagine the chasing lights of the motel’s sign cascading in the style of Las Vegas, directing the weary nighttime traveler—TURN HERE, *blink-blink*, AAA-RATED, *blink-blink*, TELEVISION. As I picture it, before trying one of those fine restaurants, the traveler—his name is Joe—pauses in the office, lifts a postcard from the pile, and writes to relatives in Westwood, New Jersey, leaving good wishes in the outgoing mail: “Stopping here for the night. On our way home tomorrow. Love Joe.” By the time this particular card was written, in September 1964, my family had left Starke. They never met Joe or his family, though the complimentary tourist postcards still read, “Marion & Ralph Borchardt—Owners & Managers.”

Starke can be found west of Jacksonville, a little more than halfway to Gainesville, and is now known as part of a speed trap along U.S. 301, once called the Highway of Southern Hospitality. Back then, to attract tourists and other comfort-seekers, my grandfather advertised a nine-hole putting green and dug a pool that would be visible from the highway. He’d send his daughters out to lounge and splash and slide along the slide, proof of the family fun and relaxation on offer. When the Borchardts first arrived, my mother and

those siblings who were old enough were sent into the gravel lot with cardboard to pad their knees and instructed to pick weeds. They whitewashed the trunks of shade trees to prevent splitting and the damage caused by girdling rodents and wood-boring pests. Everyone in town seemed to paint the trees. There was shuffleboard, too.

In the evenings, after the day’s rain, my grandfather drove through Starke counting cars in the lots of other motels, doing the math and feeling like a winner. For guests visiting family members held in the nearby state prison, home of Florida’s electric chair, he offered a special rate, either out of sympathy or, envisioning the stream of customers who would return once a month, good business sense. (Probably both, my mother says.)

Growing up in southeastern Wisconsin, where my mother returned after state university in Tallahassee, I heard bits and pieces about my family’s lives in Starke: of picking weeds, painting trees, of how a quarter would bounce off a well-made bed. As a teenager new to Florida and learning to drive, my mother once had the brakes fail, so she drove while blaring the horn until eventually the engine blew up. She still sometimes tells a story of my grandfather looking on from behind the office counter as the father of a death-row inmate, lost in grief, allowed a cigarette to burn through the vee of his fingers, singeing his hair, without seeming to notice. Another time, my mother corrected my grandfather’s spelling on the sign out front: JFK ASSINATED, he’d written. We laugh.

Starke’s growth as a Florida destination began in 1940, when the U.S. Army leased Camp Blanding, just east of town on Lake Kinsley, to be used as an induction center and training camp. Starke’s population essentially doubled from 1940 to 1950, reaching 2,944 by decade’s end. Tourism was likewise on the rise, and in the five years after World War II, U.S. 301 saw average daily traffic volume increase by nearly ninety percent. Two summers before my family arrived, traffic rates for the era reached their peak at close to seven thousand cars per day.

Hospitality like the kind you found at the Starke Motor Court was the backbone of the city’s success at midcentury—a success amplified by town boosters, from the Chamber of Commerce to the local newspaper. A sort of advertorial map published in October

1951 in the *Bradford Daily Telegraph* shows Starke marked with a star, made to appear like the biggest city in the state. On this map, U.S. 301 was the major artery toward Tampa’s coastline and the first leg of a trip where, reaching Ocala, the traveler merged with U.S. 27 en route to Miami. Government officials and Starke businesses often arranged beautification projects, including one in the spring of 1963—“Clean-Up, Paint-Up, Fix-Up Week”—that the mayor declared by proclamation and my grandfather endorsed as a signatory: “WHEREAS, the general health and welfare of our citizens depend upon wholesome surroundings arising from good, clean living conditions . . . ”

My grandfather had been a contractor and a builder in Milwaukee. When business slowed, he drove a taxi. He decided that hospitality in a Florida boomtown offered better opportunity and better weather. He’d grown tired of the cold. So he uprooted his family. My grandmother, who at first approved of the move, had a difficult transition; active in her Catholic church in Milwaukee and very close to her three sisters back home, she found her new religious community small. Starke itself felt broadly anti-Catholic and, despite some kindly outreach, uninviting. Missing home up north, she made few friends down south, rejecting the efforts of local women. And despite whatever pride my grandfather felt in what would prove to be a successful business, my grandmother’s unhappiness was so pronounced that within months they put the motel back on the market. It would take more than two years before they found a buyer who would pay enough to allow them to recoup their investment.

Coming from the North, my family felt “culture shock,” I’ve been told. My grandmother perhaps especially. My mother also complains about the very few Catholics in town; she, too, was homesick. They’ve never mentioned the Ku Klux Klan rally in November 1963, led by the organization’s “traveling parson,” Rev. Connie Lynch, a racist agitator known for cruising through the South in his coral-colored Cadillac and wearing a vest resembling the Confederate battle flag. His half-hour speech one Monday night, delivered three miles south of Starke, sounded the cause of white supremacy and criticized the president and his family for what Lynch called “the Kennedys’ One-World Plan.” The *Telegraph* reported more than fifty cars at the rally, “many of



them from Duval County”—that is, out-of-towners, the paper was careful to note. “There were less than a dozen robed clansmen at the rally,” the story says, and most of those in attendance remained in their cars. They nevertheless basked in the burning of an eighteen-foot cross.

When my grandfather was finally able to sell the Starke Motor Court, in early 1964, he moved the family to Florida’s Gulf Coast, where for a time he owned a bigger and bet-

ter tourist motel, the Driftwood. Starke’s own fortunes would deteriorate quickly over the rest of the decade, with the rapid rise of the interstate highway system offering faster routes to Tampa and Miami. Today, U.S. 301 is heavily trafficked, but few people stop for the night. After selling the Driftwood, my grandfather invested well and retired early, built a house in Sarasota, played organ music at home and in church, traveled the world with his wife, learned

Pac-Man, taught me golf, rode a motorcycle, and, in 1988, moved with my grandmother to a mobile home park in Palmetto, Manatee County, where he joined the computer and shuffleboard clubs. These are the ways and the places I knew him best—call it retirement Florida, golf-course Florida, white-beach Florida. Starke was a different place, of a different time in both our family history and our national history. I never went there. As my family described it, Starke was a bad

complimentary tourist magazine and woke in the morning to the swirling red and blue of a traffic stop outside my door, right where the pool had been. The bypass is supposed to open in 2019. According to the *Gainesville Sun*, it is “projected to route 25,300 vehicles a day away from downtown Starke.” By then, Starke will be a stopover for no one, home only to the prison. The owners of the two motels, both Indian immigrant families, anticipate having to close their doors.

As 1964 opened, the motel sold, and the local paper reported on the election of Robert Scott, a brick mason from Lawtey, seven miles up the highway from Starke. He’d won eighty-four votes in a tight city council race, becoming the first black official elected in Bradford County since Reconstruction. He was to be sworn in alongside incumbent Dave Shuford (one hundred and five votes) and newly elected Spud Massey (eighty-five votes) at the first council meeting of 1964.

On Sunday, December 8, 1963, around 9:10 P.M., a crude pine cross, seven feet tall and wrapped in oil-soaked rags, was propped

against a fence post near Scott’s home, then set ablaze. The cross, unmoored, eventually fell over. Whoever had put up the cross left behind an Army-type fatigue hat and footprints on a crumbling bridge near the councilman-elect’s home. On Wednesday night came the anonymous phone calls, intensifying a message that had been made clear to Scott since the election: “Get out. This is your last warning.”

Though police were posted to guard Scott’s home, he considered not taking the seat come the new year: “It ain’t worth it,” he said in a newspaper interview.

Investigations continued through Christmas, along with police protection for Scott. Six men were questioned, but no charges were brought; there was not enough evidence for a conviction. Sherriff P. D. Reddish said, “It’s all quiet now, and we’re just waiting to see what comes of it.”

In the meantime, escorted by police to and from his first meeting, Scott was quietly sworn in on January 6, 1964.

The phone calls continued. One came in to a grocery store located in what was then called the Lawtey Negro settlement: “Do you

know this fellow, Robert Scott?” the caller asked. “Well, tell him that his time is up.”

Following this, Scott attempted to resign from his position, appearing at the home of Mayor Charles Shuford on Saturday morning, January 25. The mayor sent him away. The city charter stipulated that only the council itself had the authority to accept his resignation. They never did, because in the following days, Scott changed his mind. And though masonry work took him to Cocoa, Florida, over the next month, he would eventually appear with the council in early March. As his wife put it to the *Telegraph*, Scott had decided “to stick it out,” even as threats against him and others continued. A former councilman named Leslie Phillips received menacing phone calls—in a “hoarse whisper,” the paper reported—and had a black cross painted across his front screen door. White resident A. E. Massey, father of councilmembers Spud and Wayne Massey, also answered his phone to whispers. Scott’s election, followed by his decision to remain in his position, had brought the entire council under fire, even if the council itself was divided in its support of this black official.

His employment in Cocoa complete, when Scott returned to the council, he took part in a debate about a new Lawtey streetlight. The *Telegraph* records the proceedings under the headline NEGRO COUNCILMAN CHOOSES SIDES:

The Negro councilman seemed at ease throughout the entire hour and a half session, sitting calmly as a storm erupted just before adjournment about a streetlight recently placed in front of Scott’s home. Installation of that particular light was never cleared before the council in a formal meeting and Mayor Charles Shuford said after the meeting it was “an emergency measure.”

Councilman Wayne Massey supplied the spark for the argument by mentioning the light and adding, “I never noticed it until the last two weeks: it looks as if it should have come before the council like any other streetlight.” The statement drew prompt fire from Chairman Dave Shuford who stormed back:

“Now, Massey, you know why it’s there. . . . I’ve about got enough of all this. Do I have a motion that we remove the light?” Wayne Massey made the motion and Spurgeon [Spud] supplied

the second. The vote was 3-2 against the Massey motion to move the light.

My family never mentioned these incidents that transpired in the background of their lives, in the local paper, at the edges of town. They never knew this fellow, Robert Scott, never saw the burning crosses. By the end of 1963, they were packing up to leave Starke because it had made them uncomfortable and homesick. Perhaps they used the newspaper pages to wrap their glass.

Press them and my family will talk about the paid employees at the Starke Motor Court, all black women. No one remembers any names, and my mother tells me she can’t recall ever speaking with them, that the women tended to avert their eyes. They pushed carts from room to room, made beds and tidied up, then collected their pay. Walking down the sidewalk in Starke, black residents would step into the streets to offer the right-of-way to young white girls and their families. For all they knew—my aunts and uncles, that is—this was the law. “This was the time of colored drinking fountains,” says my mother, who now lives half the year in a retirement community in Bradenton, near Sarasota. “This was before civil rights.”

This was before there was a motel in Starke to accommodate black travelers.

This was “culture shock.”

My family had believed the lie about Florida, the lie that they then, with their whites-only motel, proceeded to sell—Florida was a place apart, pure vacation land, farther south than the Deep South, and so therefore free of the history bound up in Connie Lynch’s battle flag. (Lynch, who was born in Texas and ordained in California, died in Starke in 1972, while taking a bath at a friend’s home.) But there’s truth in a saying about the state, which I first heard from a white public defender during my travels through Ocala: In Florida, the farther north you go, the farther South you wind up. There’s no escaping history. In the North, neither.

In my experience, the larger family—the greater Northern family—originates just outside Milwaukee, in West Allis, Wisconsin, an area shaped by segregation, in houses that satellite the State Fair Park, in neighborhoods that even today remain nearly ninety percent white. Some of my extended family, aunts and uncles and cousins of various removes, still occupy homes and neighbor-

hoods that I first knew as the domain of my grandmother’s generation, where my grandfather constructed houses, where my mother fled for a time after moving to Starke. Over the years, others have feathered out across rural southeastern Wisconsin—where I was raised, where I learned my racial slurs and invented Chester Washington—and a few more have landed on Florida’s Gulf Coast. They have pools and shuffleboard.

It has occurred to me since returning from Starke and asking to hear more stories that, when they first arrived, my family felt out of place largely because of racial politics they either could not see for what they were, or, if they did, simply haven’t remembered, or haven’t wanted to talk about. Some of my aunts and uncles may have been too young. My mother thinks she was naive. Grandpa Ralph is no longer around to ask. My grandmother, now ninety-one, doesn’t remember much of anything anymore. But is it any wonder that women working in a tourist motel, who made beds they’d never be allowed to sleep in, might keep their heads down as the owners’ daughters rushed out to the pool? Is it even a question why

a black family on the sidewalk might make way when my family came along? In a place where eighty-four votes can win you an election, the sum total of fifty revved-up cars, a dozen white hoods, and an eighteen-foot cross presumably left an impression, even if some of those people in their cars had driven over from Duval County.

Even so, I think my family’s discomfort in Starke was real and, in its way, understandable. I have found it worth describing, at least. Because the shock my mother relays may well have been the shock of realizing that she is white, or that white was something she could even be. Which, I must admit, resembles the shock—my *incomprehension*—at Dwight Maxwell’s desire to be left alone; or, more recently, the shock of being accosted by three guards while snapping tourist photos in the grassy lot of a prison while the family of an inmate motors away until next month’s visit. I didn’t know, I said. *I didn’t know* was something I could say. I was not detained, and I even kept one of the photos. *Here, look*, I said, *nothing!* Voilà. And then I left town, just like they all did. 🐦

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