

# SATURDAY NIGHT IN WAL MART'S PARKING LOT

*By Stephan A. Schwartz*

It was chilly and had been raining and the high overhanging pole lighting of the parking lot illuminated the empty rain slick asphalt, and the solitary man. He was moving purposefully around a small red and white circus tent and an equally diminutive trailer painted in the same colors, that was parked nearby. In an age when conformity is valued, and mega-corporations often define the terms of a person's employment, he seemed to me a wonderfully American example of how a man with a special skill can still find a sustaining niche.

Mark Crane is from Gainesville, Florida. He often works as a truck driver but, about every other week, he takes his six ponies out in the hand-

made red and white stall trailer, with his dogs and some hot coffee, and drives to a place where he can set up his pony ride. I first saw him just after midnight on a Saturday night in the Wal Mart parking lot in Commerce, Georgia. I had decided to stop there and spend the night.

I had never been in a Wal Mart until my wife Hayden and I bought a used Bluebird Wanderlodge, a kind of motorhome built by the company that also makes yellow school buses. I like motorhomes because sleeping in my own bed, with its goose down comforter, and a book next to my pillow, is much nicer than a motel's anonymous smells, inadequate pillows, thin blankets, and that certain deadness that always defines spaces you share sequentially with strangers.

The Wal Mart company made the decision that motorhomes could park in their lots over night several years ago. Up until then, anyone driving from one place to another who couldn't make it there in a single day, usually stopped in rest stops on the Interstate, parking in amongst the trucks on the truck side of the rest stop. You may not even have noticed that there is a truck side and a car side, but there is. Staying in a rest stop over night is usually breaking the law. There are almost always little

signs saying "No Overnight Parking." But this is rarely enforced, actually never, in my experience, because rest stops are a vital link in the vast caravan long-haul trucking system that crisscrosses America -- an invisible world to most people who see only trucks. Rest stops are noisy though, with night-long traffic. Truck stops are another option, but they are noisier still, and much brighter. At three a.m. they seem like docking complexes on a space station. Massive 18 wheelers constantly move in and out of the darkness to the fuel bays, as voices echo out from speakers mounted on the metal pump stanchions, frequently calling the drivers in for the free shower they get with a fill-up.

Another overnight option is the most expensive neighborhood in town. No one ever bothers you. But those kinds of neighborhoods are rarely near interstates, or even lesser roads, so getting there takes a lot of time, particularly if you have to search the neighborhood out in the first place.

Wal Marts, on the other hand are easily found, close to interstates, but far enough away to be quiet, and they have 24 hour a day on-site security patrols, so they are safer than your

house. Some are open, although mostly empty, all through the night. You can go in and buy bananas for the morning, or toilet paper, or film any time you like. All of this puts Wal Marts at the top of our list of places to stay on the road.

The Wal Mart in Commerce, Georgia, though is kind of small, and it had closed at nine, hours before we arrived. My legs were stiff from driving when we got there, and I went out to jog. Except for Crane, my wife and I, the ponies, and a night watchman asleep in his car down near the entrance, the rain slick glittering parking lot was deserted.

Crane wore a red shirt that went nicely with his pony tent. On my second turn around the lot, I realized that he was taking the ride down, not just checking it, and that no one was helping him. It seemed silly for me to be jogging when useful work could give me the same exercise. "I'd appreciate that," he said when I went over to volunteer. Close up I could see he was a man in his late 30s. "I had a help wanted sign up, and two fellas came by and said they would. But they never showed up. You know how it is," he said without malice.

Running a pony ride seemed an odd kind of job, so after we introduced ourselves, and had worked for a while, I asked him how he got into it. "Started when I was 19, working in a carnival. Then graduated to the circus," he explained as we took down the red wooden tent poles about eight feet long, and the even stronger metal poles that held up the center of his little big top. "You learn things doing a job like that, and I learned about ponies and tents. I always liked working with animals" he said, "but you know how it is... Animals and the public, the work never gets done."

By now we had the tent down, and were struggling, at least I was, with the rusty snaps -- the kind they had on black rubber goulashes when I was a child. The snaps held the storm flap in place. Beneath them was a rope lacing that knit together the three large pie-wedge shaped pieces of rubberized canvas that made the tent into one unwieldy whole. Everything was wet and stiff, and smelled pungently of horses.

Crane explained that he met his first wife in the circus, but that she got sick, something to do with her kidneys, and died. While she was

dying, to be with her, he took to truck driving. The bills kept piling up, however, and he began the pony ride, to make some extra money. He could do all right, especially in a Wal Mart parking lot, where there were always sure to be a lot of kids. As his wife went through the long process of dying the ponies and the kids made the separations from the woman he loved easier. After she was gone he kept at the pony ride because it gave him a kind of consolation.

He missed her still, he said, but had remarried to a new wife who had "a real job," by which he meant she worked for a company in a building some place. He had told her he didn't think he could work like that, and he kept doing the pony ride. That night, when I met him, he had been on the road for three weeks, working Wal Mart parking lots. Now he was tired, and ready to go home.

"The ponies love it there. They just play in the pasture. On the road, when it's nice, I put a lot of hay down, and bed them down next to the trailer. They stand around eating hay mostly." He looked at me directly, to make sure I knew he cared for his animals, which anyone could see by looking at them. "Ponies don't sleep

much on the road, you know," which I did not, " but they like to be close together, and they sleep as much as they want to."

We had the tent pieces apart and laid out and had begun to fold them together when I realized that Crane would have to undo all this work in the morning, to spread the tent out and let it dry. Either that or risk mildew and its sour smells, so different from the warm physical smells of ponies.

One by one we folded up the heavy pie wedges of material. I could not imagine how Crane could have done this alone, although that had clearly been his intent, and it made me feel good to help him. When all the pieces and all the poles were packed aboard his trailer, which had special spots for each component of the pony ride, I left him knocking out the three-foot metal tent pegs. There was only one hammer. He had 400 miles to go before he was home.

Standing in my shower stall next morning outside my window I could hear the Sunday morning families. Kids called and complained. Mothers and fathers spoke in married code. Trunk lids slammed. Meanwhile hot

water ran down my back, as a fluffy towel awaited. After drying I prized up a slat in the venetian blind of my bathroom window. It was as if the pony ride had never been. Cars in the bright sunlight filled the spaces out to the lot's edges.

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