

Above the Fitz Dixon Line

An east Texas student who had read **DRESSAGE *Unscrambled*** asked me why all the funny stories seemed to be about people in the South. I muffled the obvious but rude retort, vehemently denying any geographical bias in my choices of chronicle-able outlandish behavior. Later, while reflecting on her observation, a raft of weird travel memories surfaced—all of which originated well north of that dressage meridian known as the Fitz Dixon Line.

Of course, anyone who moves around the country very much has a “Can you top this?” tale of airport delays, traffic jams, lost luggage, or uncomfortable beds. Mine have a rustic sort of flavor to them as befits my station in life as Itinerant Purveyor of Classical Horsemanship. I mean, most everybody gets put in an unheated upstairs bedroom of a Vermont farmhouse where the water in your glass on the bed stand freezes overnight, right? And it’s equally common to be put in a guestroom bed that collapses and crashes to the floor at three a.m. That one was in New Hampshire.

New York wasn’t dull either. On one long ago stop, the clinic organizer’s five year old child had been evicted from her room so I would have some privacy. Upon climbing into her canopy bed and clicking off the light, I discovered myself being observed by dozens of glowing pairs of eyes from row upon row of stuffed animals on her wall shelves. Disconcerting.

No less so that the hostess’s Chihuahua at another clinic which left a memorable “present” in my suitcase. (No, I never told her.) Equally memorable and not much more appetizing was the favorite menu item of yet another hostess. She, in proud Conehead fashion, prepared her personal recipe for Five Hour Chicken every time I taught at her farm. It was “Five Hour,” presumably because if you cooked it any longer, it would just blow away as ash. You can imagine finishing a long day of teaching in the gloomy chill of a February indoor arena and then being told the chicken just had to bake *a few more* hours. Just before it was done, she “made” the stuffing, that is, she poured a bag of croutons into a CorningWare bowl, plopped a stick of margarine on top of it, and shoved it in the microwave. Our repast was completed by a medley of cauliflower florets, carrots, and broccoli which, before they were placed on the table, were warmed just enough to melt most of the ice crystals within. Traditionally, some families say grace before their Saturday evening meal. This woman’s words always were, “Darn, I forgot the cranberries again!”

I’ve judged or taught in a few backwater locales. One mid-Ohio town—honest—was so little that the pizza delivery truck doubled as the town’s ambulance. Another place my midday break was scheduled for fairly late . . . *too* late in fact, because by the time I arrived at the concession stand, they’d sold my lunch to someone who wandered in off the street. A friend of theirs? A higher bidder? I never found out.

On better days, I’ve dined on deviled quails’ eggs and caviar with the wife of the chairman of the Rio Conference, climbed on the remnants of Hadrian’s Wall on the Scottish border, and been entertained at a 13th century fortalice, replete with battlements from which prior tenants had poured boiling oil on the invading hordes. Back in the day, that was how they repelled attackers. Five Hour Chicken hadn’t been invented yet.