

## [G. O. Dunnell the Yankee Merchant]

W. Mass. 1938-9

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER ROBERT WILDER

ADDRESS NORTHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

DATE JANUARY 13, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT G. O. DUNNELL, NORTHFIELD  
MASSACHUSETTS

Mr Dunnell was sitting beside the stove in his little office shack near the railroad tracks in Northfield when we dropped in for a chat. The day was raw with a film of snow in the air, but the shack was warm and cosy. Mr Dunnell was in a reflective mood musing over his wife's insistence that they take a vacation and go down to "Floridy" for a few weeks. They have been to Florida several times in the years since "the children grew up["?]. Mr. Dunnell was apparently attempting to marshal some arguments to override his wife's persistence; secretly there was no doubt he was as anxious as she to be off.

In relating his experiences on previous trips to Florida we noticed Mr Dannel spoke of coming home through "Georgia, Alabama and Michigan". We started to correct this geographic blunder, but Mr Dunnell paid no heed so we let it go — Mr Dunnell came home from Florida through "Georgia, Alabama and Michigan."

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A few days after this interviews we heard that Mr Dunnell had left town for a vacation —— in Florida.

“Dunno but I'll take a couple of weeks off and go to Floridy,” said Mr. Dunnell as he charged his pipe with a coaly thumb. “Most people have got their coal. ‘Course there’s grain. But the fertilizer business won't start up for some time yet. And I guess the help will be able to bear up if I ain't around. Mebbe it'd be a sort of vacation for them, too.

After waiting for a freight train to clank by, he continued, “Don't know why I want to go to Floridy. I been there a couple of times already. And it's a long trip by automobile. Leon's been down there four or five times and knows his way around pretty good[.?] Knows what roads to take and all that.

“Last time we went we went over four hundred miles the first day. We started out of here about nine o'clock on Sunday morning and spent that night down in Delaware. We cooked up some chickens and some pies and made sandwiches that we done up in some of this waxed paper. Funny thing, but you'd think sandwiches would dry up in time. But they didn't. Two weeks later we was eating them sandwiches and they was nice and soft and seemed as good as ever.

To my exclamation of protest, Mr. Dunnell wagged his head and declared - with a twinkle: “Don't believe me, eh! Well they did and that's a fact, believe it or not.

“One trouble of riding off in an automobile is that a feller doesn't get exercise enough. Although the first time I went to Floridy I got plenty, for I tried to see both sides of the road at 2 once. I kept turning and twisting trying to see things, but / next time I didn't care so much. And a feller can't digest his food right if he don't exercise.

“Way I did it, I'd get up early every morning before we started off. Maybe I walked four or five miles - just round and back for I had to look out I didn't get lost. The country looks pretty much all alike. Hah! One morning there was some folks that stayed at the same

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tourist house we did, folks from the North they was, travelling to Floridy just like us. Kinder fussy people. Must have an early start. The folks that owned the place had to be sure and wake 'em up good and early and have breakfast ready and I don't know what all. Way we did was to drive fifty or hundred miles before we stopped for breakfast. But that wasn't the way these people done things. I got up and went out walking. I see their car was gone and supposed they was pretty well on their way to Floridy, when I saw a car coming down the street that looked a good deal like theirs. I looked at it close and there they was in it. They seen me and both their mouths popped open. They stopped and asked me how I got way down where I was so quick. I didn't know what they meant. Told 'em I just walked out to stretch my legs before cramping 'em up in the car. 'But your car was there when we left,' they said. I tumbled to what the matter was, so I asked 'em when they left. They told me, and I pulled out my watch and figgered they had been driving thirty or forty miles. 'What town is this?' they wanted to know. I told 'em it was the place where they spent last night, and you 3 should a-seen their faces. Wouldn't believe me 'till I got in and rode back with 'em to where our automobile was. Then you ought to have heard 'em take on. All about the time and the gas and the early start wasted. And how they'd gone in a circle and didn't know where they went.

"Funny about folks when they get down to Floridy. Bunch of old fools anyway, or they wouldn't be loafing around all winter claiming they could afford it because they didn't have to pay coal bills. And claiming they was keeping warm! By God, when that sun goes down it's so damed damned cold and damp that a coal fire like this one here would feel good. But they don't have no coal stoves, no. Some of the shacks they call cottages have fire places. But wood costs more'n coal does to home.

"Some of these people that talk big about spending their winters in Floridy live four or five in a room in a shack, I guess. An' the women do their own cooking, too. But you don't hear nothing about that. Cook on an oil stove, so's not to spend no money for coal, too.

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"My sister has a place at Crescent City - near in the middle of Floridy. She and her folks live there all the year 'round, She built a house out of white brick trimmed with red. What she wanted such a big house for, I don't know.

"No, she don't take winter boarders. They raise oranges and grape fruit and everything they is, I guess. I know I could lean out my bedroom winder and pick all the tangerines I wanted - right off the trees. They're lucky where they are, the frosts don't seem to hit 'em.

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Some folks try to tell yer that frosts are unusual in Floridy. I don't believe it! When I've been down there I've seen the ground kinder laid out in strips. A strip several rods wide, or maybe a mile, all white. Then would come a green place. Then another white one. Maybe it's unusual to have it snow real hard, but I bet they get a scattering of it every winter. They read in the papers of how they's a blizzard up north, and they go 'round and shake hands with each other that they've missed it. They don't stop to figger that most of us up here keeps reasonably warm, blizzard or no blizzard, while down there they have the shakes every evening. Most of those old coots that come down from the north won't touch no liquor. But they swill patent medicine that stands off the shakes. Shucks, it's nothing but damned poor whisky, and awful tasting at that. Costs two or three times as much, too.

"If they hear of somebody from the part of the north they come from, or of someone who's related to someone they know, they'll drive a couple a hundred miles to slobber on 'em. And up here they wouldn't walk across the str)et street to pass the time of day with 'em.

"Coming back this last time we come home over the mountain road. We went through Georgia and Alabama and part of Michigan, [ Mississippi?] then through Tennesse and so on home. We saw the work the Government is doing down there.

"I liked Alabama. It's farming country. And you get up on a hill and look off, and you see hills that look like little haystacks. They're round hills that come most to a point. And they're

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planted with corn clear to the top. Make you wonder how the fellers ever done it. Must a-had to a-ploughed it on a spiral.

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“Gosh, I get awful sick of riding. There ain't nothing to see most of the way to Floridy. Level country all covered with brush. And not a town nor a house for miles. Sometimes 'way off, you'd see what looked like a hill with the cars coming down it. The cars didn't look bigger than spiders from where you was. But they was full size all right. But they wan't no hill - just a little rise. And on top it was just as flat as the other place was.

“I kept sayin to the folks, ‘Give me New England where God laid out the country the right way. I don't like this flat country where you know what everythin looks like for a hundred miles. T'ain't no fun. ‘

“We went up in that monument in Washington. But I don't like to go up high any more. And I like to froze to death, too. Coldest place I was ever in. I used to like to go up high - never thought nothing about it. But my knees kind of give out now, like they did when I went surf bathing. I'll never do that again either. They said the water was warm, but it felt damned cold to me. Feller said that if I'd just jump in once I'd be all right. But I wan't. I guess your knees shaking when you go in the water and up on high places is something that comes on as you get older. It always bothered me a little to go up high - but not much. If I was building something - a barn or a windmill - I could start at the bottom and work right along up. I It wouldn't bother me a mite.

“Last time I was up high was on the farm I had up in Colrain. I was picking apples. And I got 'em all picked but nearly a barrel of Baldwins that was on a high limb that over-hung a steep bank that 6 went right down to the river. I had to get my twenty-eight foot ladder. And I had to go to the bank side and put a rock under one side of the ladder to make it even. Then I took my basket and climbed up. The ladder shook a little, so I looked down to see if it was slipping off the rock. My eye caught the river that looked far enough below me so I

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felt I was hanging on to the side of the Washington Monument. I grabbed my basket, threw my arms around the ladder and hung on, with my knees shaking enough to have shook all the apples off the tree. Finally, I managed to open my eyes and look up. I saw all these nice apples. Then I had to look down again. This time I dropped my basket, shut my eyes, and begun edging down the ladder with its rungs scraping my belly. Seemed like an hour before I finally got down. And my knees was shaking so's I could hardly stand up. I made up my mind that I didn't want them apples after all. The cattle could eat 'em after they fell off the tree.

"Guess I have a lot of fun picking apples. Once I see a dog kill a wild cat. Wouldn't think they could do it, would yer? I told my hired man to begin picking apples along the stone wall on the far side of my pasture, and that I would salt the cattle on the near side to keep 'em away from him. We had a dog we'd inherited when the old folks died. He want no good, but we didn't dast kill him, because the neighbors might talk. He was a fair coon dog, though, and he liked to hunt. But he wan't fierce. Any stranger could come and walk off with the place for all he cared. He'd just wag hip tail, and not even 7 bark - wouldn't hurt nothing.

"Well, just as we was about to start out, we heard that dog bellerin'. Next thing we knew, a wild cat came bounding out of the brush making for a tree with the dog just behind him. The tree he made for was an ash. It was an open land tree so's the branches come down pretty low. The cat got up in that and the dog tried to climb up after him. 'Course he couldn't so he started running 'round and 'round the tree. The cat was up on a limb watching him.

" ' Gosh, ' I says, ' I bet that cat come from one of those trees that you was going to pick. ' The hired man says, 'them things ain't dangerous. I ain't afraid of 'em.'

" ' Mebbe, you just soon climb up in that tree and [sahake?] him off, so's the dog can get him, ' I says. I didn't think he would, you know. I was just teasing him.

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“ ‘ Sure, ‘ he says, and starts climbing the tree. The cat crawled ‘way out on a limb. And I begun to wonder what tree I was goin' to climb before he got shook off. They wan't no other trees near. And I didn't like to give in I was scared. I figgered mebbe the hired man wan't so dumb climbing the tree. It was a darn- [right?] sight safer.

“However, I didn't get no chance to do nothing. The cat jumped out of that tree. And, by jinks, that dog grabbed it right by the back in the air. He didn't let it get any of its feet on the ground, just whirled around on his hind legs, like a whirling dervish, or somethin' and by and by he dropped it and got a-hold on its throat real quick - finished him. Gosh! I was thunderstruck. But the hired man said, ‘Pshaw, 't want nothing.’

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“There was a time when we got most rid of the wild cats. They raised Cain with a feller's chickens you know and we tried to kill them off as fast as we could. The town still offers a bounty of ten dollars for each scalp. We was gittin rid of the wild cats by killing off the deer but then some of them hunting fellers must have the deer to shoot at, so we get the deer back and the wild cats and catamounts and everything.

“But people ain't so afraid of the wild cats as they used to be in the days when they drove horses. Then the wild cats would jump on the horses or run across in front of ‘em and scare ‘em most to death. Now people drive the automobiles and just kill the wild cats off at one clip. I wouldn't be surprised if the autos didn't kill off the wild cats bettern than anythin else.”

Just at this moment a snow plow went slowly down the road beyond Mr. Dunnell's hay, grain and fertilizer shack. There was only a thin film of snow across the fields, but evidentially Northfield's highway commissioner was getting prepared for what might come.

“People certainly don't know how lucky they are these days to get their streets cleared up nice and tidy first thing after a snow storm,” Mr. Dunnell pulled thoughtfully on his grimy

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pipe[.?] “In the old days, and they weren't long ago either, we didn't get any town help at all. It was each man for himself. First, the feller that lived farthest up the road would start out with a yoke of oxen and a bob sled, with a plow each side of the runners, so's to push the snow back farther than the runners would alone. This feller would flounder through 9 the drifts with his oxen till he reached the next house. The feller there would probably hook up another yoke of oxen and start along with his shovel. They'd pick up everybody on the road, and each would make a round trip. That give us a road that we took us across the fields sometimes to get away from the hollers where the snow drifted back in no time. We'd never heard of snow fences in them days. Course there was only room for one sleigh but you didn't often meet anybody. When you did the feller comin down hill had to unhitch and get his team past. Then he had to boast his sleigh up on the bank and let the other feller by, then hitch up again. Nobody really minded. It was kind of sociable like — the other feller usually helped and you had time for a little gossip. Sometimes they built turnouts where you could turn in and let the other feller by, if you saw him coming. We didn't have no turnout on our road, except sometimes the fellers would dig one rather than unhitch.

“Nowadays folks will holler if the plows don't keep goin all night, so's they can drive out comfortable in the morning. Beats all how times changes — and people.” # “Have to expect that,” was our feeble rejoinder. “You better go to Florida, they don't expect the towns to spend money plowing roads down there.

Mr. Dunnell looked sharply out the window where his son was loading a truck.

“Well, don't say nothin to the folks about it because I'm sorta stallin right now, but I guess I'll be truckin for Floridy before long.”