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Gwinnett: Rich history beckons in Buford

By Bill York

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Buford is rich in history. In 1932, at the height of the Great Depression, Buford boasted the largest leather plant in the world, employing over 2,000 leather workers at its peak production, making horse collars, harnesses, saddles, dress shoes and boots.

Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were among Bona Allen's noted customers. Their saddles were custom designed by Bona Allen leather artisans.

The first passenger train arrived in Buford in 1871. It was known as Atlanta & Richmond Air-line Railroad. Freight trains picked up bales of cotton for transport to Northern mills.

There is a museum in Buford that will hold you spellbound for hours. Lynn Bowman is the curator. The man is an encyclopedia of information about Buford. Picture Model-T's, mired to their axles in mud, on Railroad Street, later renamed Main Street.

Bona Allen continued in the leather business until 1941, when the employees unionized. Refusing to be controlled by unions, Bona Allen closed the factory.

Six months later, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps re-opened the plant to build and repair shoes for the U.S. Army.

By August 1943, 1.5 million pairs had been made or rebuilt. During World War II, 795 civilian employees worked there turning out 6,000 pairs a day.

With the anticipated development of the Mall of Georgia, Buford underwent an urban renewal project, creating Main Street as an attraction for tourists with unique boutique shops, enticing window displays and smiling proprietors.

I found merchandise interesting in Miss Amanda's antiques and gifts. Nan Fraley's Red Hat shop brought back fond memories of my mother wearing a red hat. The Designs By Sherrie merchandise was colorful and enticingly cute. Main Street has sidewalks made from brick. The train still rumbles through town on its way somewhere, but it no longer stops for passengers. Strolling is peaceful.

Despite rapid commercial development and residential growth, Buford has managed to maintain that village allure reminiscent of yester-year when life was relished at a slower pace and people smiled more often.

I have visited art colonies in Seaside, Ore.; Carmel, Calif.; and elsewhere. The Bona Allen leather factory is now Tannery Row, a busy art colony.

Talking to artists I visited there, I discovered rare talent. I saw metal sculptures that I failed to understand. I saw bold splashes of color in abstract art.

Liana Delgado loves color. It shows in her work. I saw a reflection of a sailfish by James Klippel.

Judith Surowiec has a plethora of canvases in brilliant colors, connected, disconnected and muted. She said she paints from the gut, using ideas gained from being interested in everything.

Standing out were pieces of pottery designed by Judy Isaak, vases, bowls, plaques, plates, stoneware. I saw unique pieces in Navajo colors and several pieces fired like the Indians made their utensils for cooking and storage.

I studied a painting of a man on the moon pointing toward Earth.

Buford is not far. It's rejuvenating. It's well worth the trip. Have breakfast at the Buford Grill. They use real Georgia chicken eggs.

Bill York of Stone Mountain is a novelist, freelance writer and retired furrier. Rick Badie is off today.

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