ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

BIOGRAPHY

Don't Sell My Buggy
Thomas E. Byrne
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Two Stars (out of Five)

The horse-centered economy created a vast market for…such handicraft industries as…the construction of wagons carriages buggies and sleighs…beautifully functional with a different kind of wood for each part.

— Samuel Eliot Morrison (*The Oxford History of the American People* vol. 3 1965)

Don't Sell My Buggy is two related stories one framed inside the other. The earlier is a narrative account of the life of Moses Harrison. Orphaned in Arkansas at birth Moses grows up in Virginia and becomes a horse trainer in Tishomingo County Mississippi. He stays there until the Civil War comes to town. The later action centers around the theme of constant motion. It follows the rootless widowhood of Mary Jane Hubbard Harrison from the time of her husband Moses' death in 1894. She sells her home in northeastern Mississippi and sets out on a thirty-year circuit between her children and grandchildren in Missouri Texas and Louisiana. As her mode of transport gradually shifts to train travel riverboat and finally automobile Mary Jane insists that her son Asa hold on to her horse-drawn wagon. Even unused it represents both her independence and inertia.

One of Thomas E. Byrne's strengths is operational procedures of work tasks such as building a shelter grading with a frisno and performing maintenance on the eponymous Studebaker buggy. When primary narrator Mary Jane teaches a grandchild how to fish she seems very much alive. Close encounters with bank-robbing demigods Frank and Jesse James and a surprisingly generous General Ulysses Grant add texture: " 'Lady my soldiers are scared to death of me so don't you go around saying anything to make them believe any different. I could start having trouble.' "

Despite an abiding desire to reanimate his ancestors Byrne flubs the process by jumping from genealogical formats to fiction. The early passages are awash with pasted-in exposition and vital statistics: “Alone in her bedroom she contemplated her sons: ‘George the oldest thirty-four and the largest. He was 6 feet and one inch and weighs one hundred and eighty-five pounds.’ “

Although things improve deeper into the story a struggle against fiction’s conventions continues. Transitions between time periods are too fast and summarization of the more mundane details as well as the taking of artistic license to combine similar trips would have built more dramatic interest. The author and contributing researchers have worked countless hours to discover buried information which though valuable in the right context is unfortunately not as appreciated by readers of fiction.

Thomas E. Byrne is a Texan retired from the oil industry who has long made a hobby of local histories and genealogy. *Don’t Sell My Buggy* may prompt readers to gather information on their own American ancestors or could spur an interest in the western campaigns of the Civil War.