

## **Traveling Companion: Jake, the Traveling Man!**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

It was just before 7 p.m. on Friday night, while I sat in church. The door opened. A short, stocky man, probably in his late sixties, walked down the aisle. He carried a rolled-up bed mat, a small duffle bag and a small, white shopping bag. His deep-brown eyes peered out from a weather-beaten face that was mostly hidden by a generous, gray beard.

He said "good-evening." I replied. He continued, "I need to get to the Salvation Army. I tried to get the police to bring me there but they wouldn't. It is four miles there and I can't walk that far." I didn't have to ask any more.

I told him to wait until I got my car. We bundled his meager belongings into the trunk and he sat into the front seat.

On the way, he began to tell me his story. "I'm from Arkansas. I am a Veteran from the Korean War. My job was to go into a place after the army pulled out and destroy everything they had left behind."

I asked him how he got to Mississippi. "I am coming from San Diego. I was in the hospital there for almost two months to let them treat my war leg wound." "Why did you have to go to San Diego for treatment when, I'm sure there is a V.A. hospital in Arkansas?" I asked. "That's where my doctor is. I've been going there since the war for him to treat me."

"How long did it take you to get here from San Diego?" I asked. Two weeks! He was now on his way back to Arkansas. Did he have any family in Arkansas? Yes, he indicated, a sister but they didn't communicate much. He had left San Diego with twenty-dollars in his pocket and now had forty-five cents left.

He continued to unfold his story. He lived in a small shack in the woods, behind a cemetery in a remote part of Arkansas, the cemetery where his parents were buried. "Who takes care of his shack while you are gone?" I asked. He indicated that some hunters usually watched out for it. Also he had two Rottweilers, tied to logs, that guarded his property. "Who feeds them while you are away?" I asked. Some hunters, he indicated. "Will the dogs recognize you when you get back?" I continued. "I'm not sure. I better not go near them at night because they wouldn't recognize me and probably tear me to pieces. I will probably have to check on them in the daytime."

He then told me his itinerary for the rest of his journey home. With amazing detail, he mapped out the route he would take, where he hoped to stay along the way, the cost of train fares and bus fares and hopefully that his sister would pick him up at the bus station, five miles from his home.

By now, we neared the Salvation Complex. He motioned that I drive in to the back. He had been there before, years earlier and even had gone to Mass at the nearby Catholic Church. He hoped the caretaker would recognize him. The place seemed desolate. Security lights were turned on. There didn't seem to be anyone around. I asked what he would do if there was no one there. He said he would go out into the nearby woods and sleep under the stars. I asked if he would be okay. He indicated his confidence. He thanked me for the ride and we parted.

On the way home, I began to think about Jake and his simple, varied but rich life. I thought about the man behind the plentiful beard, the body that hadn't bathed in at least two weeks, I was fascinated with his story. I began to realize that behind the labels we often use was a human being who served his country well and who now freely roamed it, in a way, because of the freedom he fought for. I know that a little bit of Jake, the traveling man, will travel with me through the rest of my life.