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painting by Greg Doster

Meeting the Train

By Bob Warren

FRISCO'S OLDEST RESIDENT, one hundred-five-year-old Cletus Bristol, once told me that, "Going down to meet the train to see who was coming to or leaving town was quite a social occasion in Frisco's early days."

Local artist, Greg Doster, has captured just such an occasion in his beautiful watercolor painting which I like to call "Meeting the Train." Mr. Doster's passion is to create art that tells a story about a person, family and/or community – something that retells events of today and years gone by. His motto is, "Tell me a story to paint."

Before we take an in-depth look at Mr. Doster's painting, you must know he has hidden five raccoons in the painting and challenges you to find them. They aren't easy to spot, so get your magnifying glass and go "raccoon hunting."

Turn the clock back to the early 1900s. The little village founded in 1902 was named for the Frisco Railroad and, at the time, depicted in this painting,

housed little more than three hundred residents. The scene focuses on the area of Frisco's beginning. The depot was the hub of activity. From the depot the town's growth radiated eastward. It was just across the tracks from the depot that the two-day auction of town-site lots was held in February of 1902. Free whiskey was offered the bidders to – no doubt – loosen their bidding tongues.

For several months the depot housed the town's first bank which was organized by Ed (Spot Cash) Rogers and Jim White. The town's residents and neighboring farmers gathered to watch the first shipment of the bank's money arrive by rail. Within a year their bank, the First National, moved to a new brick building one block east of the tracks.

In the painting we see the train, "Old 92," standing in front of the depot heading south and blocking Main Street. A horse and rider and a horse-drawn wagon seem to wait patiently for the crossing to clear. The telegraph line which runs

parallel to the tracks was the means of communication for the train crews to get their orders up and down the line.

The water tank in the foreground stands ready to feed the thirsty steam engine. This tank is being immortalized as the north and south entrances of Frisco's Heritage Center Museum. The tank was a nighttime swimming hole and bathtub for teenage Sonny McSpedden and his buddies. They enjoyed gathering there for a swim and a soapy bath after a hot summer day – until their soap caused a problem for the steam engine. One morning, after taking on water, the train stalled about a mile up the track. It seems that soap in the water inhibits the making of steam, so Station Master Harold Bacchus, found an answer to the problem. He refilled the tank and poured a coating of black oil on the water. That evening when the boys dived in they came up coated in black oil! Under cover of darkness they made their way to the cotton gin yard to clean themselves with cotton snatched from bales. After that the

boys had to find other swimming holes to do their skinny dipping.

It is interesting to see the artist's rendition of the people who came to meet the train. There are ladies in pretty long dresses and big hats while men are more leisurely dressed—one lolling comfortably on the running board of his Model "T." Some came on foot while others came by horseback, in wagons, buggies and in fancy automobiles, but all came for the excitement of meeting the train.

The cattle pen on the left side of the painting is full of cattle ready to be loaded on the next train going to St. Louis, Kansas City or other points north. By the early 1900s shipping cattle by rail had all but replaced the long and dangerous cattle drives of the 1800s. Just north of the cattle pens we see the grain elevator and across the tracks we find one of the town's cotton gins.

Before we leave the depot area, we need to look at Frisco's jail, "the calaboose." It's that little concrete building you see east of the tracks on First Street. The calaboose was built in 1912 primarily as a holding tank for the Saturday night drunks. You can still see it there today, a crumbling memory of better days. The city plans to build a replica of the little jail somewhere near the museum.

Heading east on Main Street we find a group of buildings that housed such businesses as Gullede's Grocery, the City Drug Store, a garage and the Commercial Hotel. Across the street was the bank, a livery stable and Gaby's Blacksmith Shop. Some of Frisco's first homes were built near the railroad tracks and are visible among the trees north of Main Street.

Yes, Greg Doster, the artist has done a great job of "snapshotting" a moment in time with his watercolor brush. His work truly tells a story of how things were in Frisco's early days. We hope to see his original hanging in Frisco's railroad museum. The hidden raccoons are much easier to find in the large, original painting. Happy hunting!

Frisco native Bob Warren is an award winning humorist, historian and former Frisco mayor.

