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**The 6th Floor**  
EAVESDROPPING ON THE TIMES MAGAZINE

## States of Mind: Why Alec Soth and Brad Zellar Went to Georgia



Brad Zellar, left, and Alec Soth, right, with Leo Gilman at the Union Station Barber Shop in Utica, N.Y., in 2012.  
Sarah Newman

The Sept. 28 *Voyages* Issue includes photographs from a road trip through Georgia that was taken by the photographer Alec Soth and the writer Brad Zellar. It was their seventh such expedition since 2012; they have also visited California, Colorado, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Texas. When Soth and Zellar are on the road — they spent two weeks in Georgia in July — they post photos and writings every day on their Tumblr, called The LBM Dispatch. Afterward, they print their version of a newspaper as a record of their trip. I recently talked to Zellar about their sojourns.

### How did these dispatches get started?

The basic idea at the time was sort of crazy: Alec wanted to drive around in the exurban Twin Cities, playing at being a newspaper reporter and photographer. It snowballed pretty quickly. We had business cards printed up for our fictitious newspaper and started chasing weird local stories in places that — though seldom more than 30 miles from our homes — neither of us had ever been to. We explored the story of a cat that had been stranded for months on an island in the middle of one of the busiest highway interchanges in the metro area, eluding capture and living off the carcass of a deer and the water from a small pond. We talked to and photographed the last snow-globe repairman in America, a guy who made \$150 coffins and people at small-town service clubs, dances and township halls. The whole thing at that point was purely for kicks, but some of Alec's photos from this time are among my favorites from the whole Dispatch experience. And those brief forays around our hometown were so much fun that we seized on the opportunity to try to create an actual newspaper out of a road trip to Ohio.

## **How much planning goes into each trip?**

Right from the beginning, there was a lot of planning involved. We had specific ideas and themes we thought we could address in the format — Ohio, for instance, was about looking for signs of real-world community in the age of cyberspace and exploring the whole “bowling alone” phenomenon. And we immediately settled on Sherwood Anderson’s “Winesburg, Ohio” as sort of a lonely, thematic guide to the tone we were looking for. As is almost always the case, we ended up finding some entirely unexpected things that thwarted most of our assumptions. With each state, the research has become more exhaustive and fine-tuned — I’ll read the old W.P.A. Guides to the state, histories, literature associated with the place, and we’ll scour local newspapers and events calendars for stuff that might have some potential for good photos and narratives. We’ve had institutional sponsors and support in most of the states, but that hasn’t complicated things on our end. We cover a lot of miles and have generally spent two or three weeks on each trip, but we’re seldom just wandering around. We like to have an agenda and a destination every day when we load the van. And we have self-imposed deadlines and produce and process the work as we’re moving; when we get to a motel at night, Alec starts sending me photos, and I start typing. It’s a fast and furious process, but very efficient. We usually have the print issues of the paper edited and to the printer less than a week after we get back home. I should also say that on every one of these trips, we’ve had amazing and unbelievably talented assistants, who have been involved in the planning and been collaborators in every sense of the word.

## **What were your impressions of Georgia?**

For a lot of reasons, Georgia was at the top of my wish list when we started out on this odyssey. We’re Midwestern guys. I grew up in a small town in what is probably one of the whitest parts of the country. The South was a source of fascination from a very early age, and by the time I was in high school, I had keyed in on Georgia as a confounding, fascinating and almost mythical place. It had so much weird, contradictory history — really, the whole history of the country played out there at one time or another: the Revolutionary War, slavery, the Civil War, the Great Depression, the civil-rights movement and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. There were also, for me, such huge influences as Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, Ray Charles, Otis Redding and James Brown. It struck me as an entirely different planet from the world I was familiar with. And as we were traveling around Georgia — we covered 2,400 miles in two weeks — we were struck by this uneasy sense that a lot of those issues are still unresolved there, that there’s still incredible poverty and segregation and these bastions of immense wealth and all sorts of examples of what feels like antebellum nostalgia. A “Gone With the Wind” thing, I guess. It was a wonderful trip, but absolutely nothing like any of the other states we visited.

## **Georgia was the final trip. Why are there going to be no more dispatches?**

We’ve been at it for a long time, and the archive and — for lack of a better word — narrative has gotten huge and unwieldy. We stockpile many, many more photos and stories than we can use in the print issues of *The Dispatch*, and so many of the stories are so much bigger and deserve much more space than we’ve been able to give them. At this point, we feel like we’ve covered much of the country, and it’s time to start digging into that archive and trying to make sense of the whole project. Most of this work has been seen by so few people, and Alec hasn’t printed or shown the work yet, and I think we’re both eager for that to happen. It’s such a torrent of images and voices when we’re moving, and I know I’m eager to take a step back, take a good long look at what we’ve done and start trying to sort out that chorus of faces and voices.

## **Will there be a book?**

We’re both book guys and have gone about this whole thing from the start with the idea that it was a book project, and the papers were a way of generating material and playing with ideas. The goal now is to produce two radically different books — one a more traditional art book with a tighter edit of photos from all the trips and some of Alec’s other black-and-white work from the same period, and another a kind of *Dispatch Reader*, a trade book, affordable and very browseable, that would be much more of a travelogue of the whole experience, with lots more photos and an expanded narrative that gives some of the stories a bit more space and also goes into more detail about the origins of the project and the incredible people

we've met, things we've seen (and eaten), and all the things we've talked about on the road and learned from these journeys.

**Photos From Alec Soth and Brad Zellar's Dispatches**



Bree, Liberty Cheer All-Stars. Corsicana, Tex. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Hearne, Tex. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Cory and Justin, bull riders. San Antonio. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Waskom vs. Rosebud-Lott; high-school football playoffs; Southlake, Tex. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Lightning the Diving Horse. Magic Forest; Lake George, N.Y. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Marie, with Alexis and Jessica. Saratoga Race Course; Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Alec Soth/MagnumPhotos



Bill Johnston's Pirate Days. Thousand Islands region; Alexandria Bay, N.Y. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Jan. Saratoga Race Course; Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Jesse Reese, American Legion Post 205. Dover Burial Park; Dover, Ohio. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Betty. Gary's Diner; Clyde, Ohio. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Bil ("My mother said she couldn't pronounce the other L"). Dance N Style; Sandusky, Ohio. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Betty, Annena and Inez. Madden Golf Club Women's Association; Dayton, Ohio. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Round Table Pizza; Santa Clara, Calif. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Facebook's main campus; Menlo Park, Calif. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Martin Etchamendy, Basque shepherd. Outside Bakersfield, Calif. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Miguel. Woodville Farm Labor Camp; San Joaquin Valley, Calif. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos



Dottie. Denver. Alec Soth/Magnum Photos