

4-18-94

Retreading Across the Country

I wish that I had made notes on the various trips we have taken over the years. Memory is an interesting phenomenon. Things that seemed so vivid that I would remember them accurately forever soon become entangled with each other or fade into a fuzzy cloud. In particular, I'm having difficulty putting into proper order my memories of a journey Paul and I made across the continent in 1945.

When we were married, Paul was a Special Agent and Cryptanalyst with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, assigned to Portland, Oregon. Later he received a transfer from Portland to Bureau headquarters in Washington, D.C. We'd been living on three hundred dollars a month, not really a bad income for that time, but, like many other recently married couples, we had saved very little and consequently the transfer presented a problem. His transportation and meals were provided, but mine were not (although soon after that the rule was changed and families had moving allowances). So, what to do? Paul could get ration stamps for gasoline, and he had enough accumulated leave that we could spend three weeks getting to his new assignment. We found a 1936 Chevrolet for three hundred sixty dollars, incidentally the only blue car we've ever owned. I was awarded an Oregon permit to drive after an "iffy" road test because the trooper said I would have ample time to polish my rusty driving skills on the virtually deserted roads on our way across the continent and wouldn't endanger Oregonians. Using the free maps we got from gas stations, together with the advice of friends, we had calculated that the distance to Washington was about the same whether we went across the northern part of the country or through Dallas for a long over-due visit with family.

The car was in good condition and it had four tires with moderately good treads, a plus in war-time. We bought a fifth tire - a retread - for safety. We packed our clothes, books, and records into the trunk and back seat of the Chevy and headed south at the war-time legal thirty-five miles an hour through Oregon to cross the continent. We scrupulously followed the most direct route, reluctantly omitting side trips to places we hoped to see at some later date. But we still saw some dazzling scenery, came in contact with many interesting people, and had a thoroughly good, though slow, trip across the country.

After stopping in Salem for Paul to get a haircut, we left town heading for a mountainous road out of Oregon. When my turn to drive came, Paul went to sleep and I discovered that mountain curves were frightening unless I took the inside of every curve, to stay as far away as possible from the dazzling valley sights. I met no cars and was feeling pretty good about my driving when Paul awoke just as I was negotiating a switch-back on the left side of the two-lane road. Despite the absence of competition for that left lane, I received my first lesson in handling curves, a lesson I've been able to put to good use on more heavily traveled roads. We mercifully had no flat tires on that section of our journey.

I have a great many more memories of that trip, although not necessarily in the proper order and sometimes without corroborative details because of the lack of a diary. Innocent and inexperienced travelers, we had no reservations. The first night out we were

able to rent an enormous but affordable recreation room behind a diner near an army base in northern California. The adventure there, in addition to the size of the room, came when Paul had to shave in a basin of cold water the next morning.

When we reached Reno, Nevada, late one evening, we were able to find a room in a regular motel. Leaving after breakfast the next morning, we had our first flat tire. The narrow shoulder we pulled onto dropped off to a railroad track some twenty feet below us. A gang of Mexican workers were repairing the track just below us. They serenaded us with enthusiasm and waved us on after Paul changed the tire. Then we had trouble finding a spare.

We stopped at the first crossroads store-and-filling station to gas up and get something cold to drink, but he came out of the store, hastily, without drinks. After the store was out of sight, he stopped and emptied his coat pockets of several handfuls of nickels. He had idly dropped a nickel in the lone slot machine standing in the store, pulled the lever - and hit the jackpot. Then he noticed several men playing checkers and glowering menacingly at him. They were obviously the ones who had filled the machine. It was their money, and they were hardly pleased to see a stranger hit *their* jackpot. Before they could decide what to do about it, Paul got back to the car and we left in a real cloud of dust. That eighteen dollars worth of nickels was a welcome bonus. After all, that was before plastic money eased one's travels. We did find a tire farther down the road, not the last one we had to buy, for we had frequent flats, most of them not repairable.

The day was further enhanced by our crossing Hoover Dam. Security was tight, and we had trouble when Paul answered truthfully that he had a revolver in the car, one he was required to carry; however, no weapons were allowed on the dam, even in a locked briefcase in the trunk as his was. His Bureau credentials and a phone call allowed us to keep the gun and continue on what was the only road in that direction for hundreds of miles. We were able to enjoy the view of Lake Mead as we drove across to a parking area which overlooked the outside of the dam. Then we continued our slow way across Arizona and into New Mexico. Near Tucumcari, whose name I remember because of a popular song at the time, we stopped so that Paul could help an older man change a tire. (Let's face it: he was an *old* man to us!) He amused us by saying that he apparently lacked the "ginger" to loosen the lug nuts on the tire, a comment Paul recently recalled when a young man stopped to help him when we had a flat here in Richmond.

That night we were excited to enter Texas but for the first time could find no lodging. Finally, we pulled into a parking place around the deserted courthouse square in Palo Pinto and spent the night. We awakened at dawn with stiff necks from sleeping in the front seat, but we were young enough to recover quickly as we started on what we hoped was the last leg of our trip to Dallas. Mid morning, Paul took his turn sleeping while I drove. His last words before nodding off were, "If you have a blowout, don't step on the brake!" I found the flat country made for easy driving and was making good time on the straight, auto-less highway, most likely driving a bit over the speed limit. My reverie, and Paul's sleep, were shattered by an explosion! I hit the brake forcefully before I recognized the noise as a blowout. With a wide shoulder and no traffic, I was able to pull the car to a

stop, thanks to the thirty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit. Paul was an experienced tire changer by now, and I was an accomplished hander of tools and supplies. Thank goodness it hadn't happened in the mountains in Oregon.

Our visit with our families and friends in Dallas was restful and fun. Finally, we resumed our travel, stopping one night at a tourist cabin in Brownsville, Tennessee, in a drenching rain. Probably the only reason I remember that specific stop was the quaintness and smallness of the cabin, coupled with the hard rain. In Knoxville we had another flat on a hill on the University of Tennessee campus. A couple of students came along and insisted on changing the tire for us. Is that what it means to be a "Volunteer"?

As we drove up US Highway 11 through Virginia, I had my first look at Virginia. I was impressed with the greenness and beauty of the countryside. The first word that came to my mind at that time was *civilized*. I had no idea that we would some day live in that civilized state. We stayed with Paul's sister-in-law (his brother was at sea with the Navy) in the District of Columbia while Paul went to work and I started out every day to find a place for us to live. Finally, it was through his office that we found an apartment we could rent - *if* we bought the furniture. It was war-time furniture with no springs in the upholstered sofa and easy chair, but it was surprisingly comfortable and the apartment was good enough that we sold the car in order to buy the furniture. We shed no tears when we parted with our Chevrolet but did wish the new owners good luck with their retreads.