

High School Graduation Trip

by

Matthew A. Nelson

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Graduation from Natrona County High School in Casper, Wyoming occurred on June 3, 1964. Two days later, my friend Roger Tresler and I embarked on one of the most memorable trips of my life. We left Casper for the New York World's Fair in a 1960 Volkswagen Bug that belonged to my parents.

My father was raised in Talledega, Alabama in a family of eleven brothers and sisters. He had relatives scattered throughout the South. My mother suggested two or three months before graduation that we ought to think about visiting some of these people. We both had worked for the Casper school system as janitors, and each of us had a few hundred dollars saved. The seed was planted, and the World's Fair became the destination, but the route we ended up travelling was via Panama City, Florida.

We departed Casper on Friday, June 5th. The VW was full of sleeping bags, ice chests, homemade chocolate chip cookies that Roger's mother made, and what other junk we could fit in. That night we stayed in Hastings, Nebraska. We must have camped out, but I don't remember. The next morning the VW's throttle linkage broke, so we used a matchbook to keep the throttle open, and drove at 25 MPH to Grand Island, where there was a VW shop. Once the VW was fixed, we proceeded to drive the legal speed limit of 75 MPH through Kansas to Muskogee, Oklahoma. At Muskogee, we stayed with my former Pastor and his wife, where we went to church, and then headed on to Nashville.

After driving through the rolling hills of Arkansas, we camped at Bull Shoals Lake, near Mountain Home. That night, the sky was clear, and the stars were dazzling in their brilliance. Little did we expect to be in jail the next night! On Monday morning, we were about 10 miles East of Mt. Home, when the VW started clacking and then just stopped. If an oil company had seen the amount of oil under that VW Bug, they would have had a drilling rig that afternoon. We found out later that a valve had broken off and caused immediate and excessive engine damage. Some guy came along and *sold* us a ride back to Mt. Home for a dollar, which made us angry. In Wyoming, if somebody needed assistance, a person would stop and help for free.

There wasn't a VW repair place in Mt. Home. Roger and I came up with the idea that we could buy a used 1957 Plymouth from Fisk Chevrolet, tow the VW to have it repaired, park the Plymouth in Nashville at my relatives, proceed with the trip in the VW, drive back to Nashville to pick up the Plymouth, and then Roger would keep it for his car. How we expected to have travel money is beyond me! We had enough money to buy the car, but because Roger wanted to have the car in his name, his parents had to give permission over several long distance phone calls, as he was still 17. We finally clinched the deal and wrote out most of traveler's checks late in the afternoon. Then we drove this fine Plymouth with push button automatic drive to some town in Missouri to rent a tow-bar at a U-Haul shop. Neither one of us had a credit card, but we were able to rent the tow-bar without difficulty.

The town in Missouri was about an hour away from Mt. Home. About 10 miles from Mt. Home, the Plymouth died. For the second time that day, we hitched a ride to Mountain Home, Arkansas. The guys who gave us a ride must have been running moonshine. They were driving 100 MPH on winding, twisting roads that added just a little more excitement on this unforgettable day. I would rather have paid another dollar for a safer ride.

By the time we arrived in Mountain Home, we had four dollars between us, two broken down cars, each on a different road about 10 miles from town, and no place to stay. I

had heard that sometimes people could stay in jail for free if they were broke. We weren't street smart, and didn't really know about vagrancy laws. So we went to the local sheriff, and told him of our day. His first words were, "Are you those two boys from Wyoming?" We said, "Yes Sir", and he told us that my mother had been calling him all day, and that the insurance would pay for the towing of the Volkswagen to Jonesboro, about 120 miles away. He said we were welcome to stay overnight in the jail and that we would not be charged of doing anything wrong. The jail was just one big open room upstairs. He said that he would lock the door for our own protection (whatever that meant - I didn't know, because we were the only people in jail. Later, my mother said he called her back, and told her that he locked us in, so that we would know what it felt like to be locked up, and stay away from trouble.) We were so tired by then it didn't matter.

About 7 AM the next morning, the sheriff opened the door and woke us up. He said we could have breakfast on the county, but we declined. It was still a spooky feeling to be locked up, and we were ready to get out of jail. The sheriff talked to Mr. Fisk, who reluctantly agreed to buy back the Plymouth. The fact that Roger was still 17 worked in our favor - had he been 18, we would have been stuck with the car. Mr. Fisk also was responsible for having the car towed back to Mountain Home. The sheriff was about 70 years old. Three years later, when I was in the Army and stationed in Japan, I read in the "Stars and Stripes" newspaper that this old man was killed in a jailbreak from the same jail. He treated us well, and I felt sad upon reading about it. For the record, this is the only time I have ever been in jail, and then, it was at my own request!

Later that morning a tow truck came from Jonesboro for the VW. At the time, I had \$400 in savings in Casper, so I had my parents wire it to me. This paid for the engine replacement. By the time the VW was repaired, it was early evening, and we still had approximately 300 miles to drive to Nashville. At 1:30 AM we were both exhausted, and decided to park the VW along some bushes off the road. We grabbed the sleeping bags and were sound asleep when we were abruptly awakened by a roaring freight train. The engineer of that train, if he is still alive, must still chuckle at the sight of two kids hopping around in sleeping bags three feet from the tracks, as he blew the train whistle.

Once in Nashville, we stayed with my grandmother, who lived with my aunt and uncle. Birmingham was our next stop, and then we travelled on to Montgomery, where Roy Orbison and Leslie Gore were singing in a concert. At the concert, somebody said some lines I have never forgotten: "When you gotta go, you gotta go, because if you don't go when you gotta go, when you do go you will find out that you have already been". Roger dated my cousin, and I dated one of her friends. Those Southern Belles with their Southern accents were so charming!

Gulf waters and bikinis lured us to Panama City, Florida. The sand was so white, and the water such a pretty emerald green, that even today, 27 years later, the images are very vivid. After a day on the beach, once again we needed a place to stay. We found a deserted picnic table. Roger slept on top of the table, and I slept on the ground underneath it. I think this trip was the beginning of my living like a bum at various times of my life and yearning for the call of the road that only a vagabond can understand.

More relatives were visited in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia, and in Charleston, South Carolina. We learned quickly how to freeload off of relatives, and to plan our daily driving accordingly. In Charleston, we visited Ft. Sumter. On the boat ride to the fort we saw a boat speed limit sign for 3 MPH. Besides some large cannons, that sign is about all I remember about the fort.

About two weeks after leaving Wyoming, we arrived in Washington, D. C., during the evening rush hour traffic. I had never been caught up in a traffic jam, with so many people driving like crazy madmen. As I recall, that night we walked up Washington's Monument, toured Lincoln's Monument, and visited the Eternal Flame on President John Kennedy's

grave at Arlington National Cemetery. We toured the Capital and the FBI building on the next day.

However, once again on the day we arrived, we didn't have any idea where to sleep. Our trip occurred three years prior to the hippie movement, and is probably why nobody, including the police, bothered us. The D. C. jail undoubtedly would not have been the same fun adventure as the one in Mountain Home, Arkansas. Iwo Jima National Monument looked as though it would be a great place to unroll sleeping bags, so that's what we did. At 3 AM the rains came to cleanse the pigeon calling cards off of the monument. The only refuge we had was our Volkswagen. The same crazy drivers we had encountered the day before woke us about 7 AM with their rude horns.

After washing up in a service station rest room, we decided to visit Senator Milward L. Simpson from Wyoming. Although we had taken showers the day before, I'm sure we were not the most presentable. Undaunted, we found Senator Simpson's office.

Senator Simpson was very receptive to us, and very friendly. He chatted with us a few minutes, and told me that he had known my grandfather, who had been in the newspaper business. He said that he would like to have our photograph taken by the official Senate photographer. At that time, I realized that I needed a shave, and told him so. He said that I could shave in his private bathroom. I went into the bathroom, and lathered up. Just then, he called and said that the photographer was there, so I cleaned off the shaving cream. Roger and I had our photograph taken with Senator Simpson, and the Senator later mailed me a copy. After the photographer left, he said, "Boys, I have to go to the Senate Floor for a very important vote." He told me to finish shaving. I had started shaving at age 15 with an electric razor. The very first time in my life that I shaved with a double-edge blade was in a United States Senator's private bathroom, using Senator Simpson's own razor and a green can of Rise shaving cream, when I was 18.

I will always remember the day Senator Simpson took time to talk to a couple of kids from Wyoming. That was the same day that the U. S. Senate voted on the 1964 Civil Rights Legislation.

In the evening of the same day, we finally drove the VW to the outskirts of New York City. We parked at some gas station, where once again we slept in the VW. Prior to leaving Wyoming, we had taken the back off the rear seats, and placed the ice chests between the front and back seats. It wasn't too difficult to stretch out if we had our heads near the engine and stuck our feet out the door windows! By now, we were quite adept at this method.

Early, the next morning, we achieved our goal of going to the World's Fair. The principal symbol of the Fair was a globe with a diameter of about 60 feet. As I recall, either while we there, or the next day, the population of the United States reached the 200 million mark. There was a population sign there that looked like a progressive jackpot at Las Vegas. Half of those people had to have visited the Fair the same day we did. Growing up in Wyoming did not prepare me for the massive numbers of humanity.

The next day we visited a friend of my parents from World War II. She had a daughter that I started writing to, and later, I sent her my high school class ring. Eventually, she probably threw that ring into the Hudson River, but that's another story.

The Statue of Liberty beamed, so we climbed into its torch. Near the area where we boarded the Staten Island Ferry was a true down-and-out bum. He was sleeping on a park bench in the middle of the afternoon, oblivious to the tourists from Wyoming. It is my impression that on this day I also met my first panhandler, but I may be confusing this with other trips to New York City.

With our World's Fair objective obtained, and our cash supply dwindling, it was time to start heading home. Our next major stop was at Niagara Falls. Impressive as the falls were,

the one image I remember was the beautiful face of the girl at the souvenir shop on the Canadian side. I almost told Roger to go on home without me! We then drove through a small section Ontario, to Windsor, where we crossed the U. S. / Canadian border into Detroit. During the saga of the sick VW, the front license plate was bent out of shape. The U. S. Customs man laughed as he asked us if we had tangled with a Wyoming moose.

In Detroit, we stayed with a cousin who previously had worked as a stewardess (flight attendants hadn't been invented yet). The only thing I remember about her is that Elvis had once flown on one of her flights. As the years go by, it is rather strange what details one thinks of. At the Ford Motor plant, we watched Mustangs being built, and molten steel being cast into engine blocks. From Detroit, we wandered down to Ft. Wayne, Indiana, to visit my mother's aunt and uncle. This man's career probably touched every family in America since the Thirties: He designed gasoline pumps for Tolkien.

If Alfred Hitchcock required weird plot material for his next movie, his quest would have ended in Davenport, Iowa, on a sultry, foggy night in June. The entire downtown area was invaded by millions of moths, each about 2 inches long. Plate glass windows on the stores were absolutely covered by these moths, and the tires of the VW crunched through layers of these Mississippi River born creatures.

My sister, Karen, lived in Crete, Nebraska. It had been five months since she married, and we had seen each other. We had a good visit as we stayed with her on our last night on the road.

June 26th was Roger's 18th birthday, and the day we arrived home. Wyoming never looked better! Laramie Peak, our own Rock of Gibraltar, guided us across the ocean of the wide-open plains, antelope, and sagebrush. Finally, upon seeing Casper Mountain, Roger and I knew that our 6300-mile odyssey in a Volkswagen was over. I had a nickel in my pocket.

Twenty-seven years have passed since this trip occurred. Roger and I are still good friends, but only see each other once every 3 or 4 years. Each of us served as Best Man at the other's wedding. Occasionally, I see some of my relatives, and they always ask about him. After thirty years of knowing Roger, I can proudly say that our friendship has passed the test of time.

I owe my parents a special thank you, because without their encouragement and trust, I might not have started traveling down the endless highway. Roger always liked my sister Cathy; she is not here to read this. This story is dedicated to her.