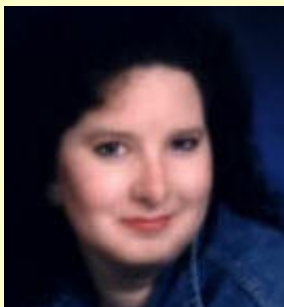


## Travel: Now and Then

By Graceann Maciolek



*(In all cases, the child in the photographs is the columnist "then".)*

I look around me at families on the road and in airports, and I'm consistently amazed at how different vacation travel is now compared to when I was a child. Not even considering the heightened security at airports and borders, and the ever-increasing gasoline prices, things have changed considerably, and I'm not sure when or how the shift occurred. At the airport, I see kids (and adults for that matter) isolated with their iPods and personal DVD players – even cars have DVD players in them, as if the stimulation mustn't cease, even for a few hours.



The first time I visited Walt Disney World, it had only been part of the firmament for six years. It was easy to visit using a three-day pass, and even one day was enough if you had specific things you wanted to visit. There was also healthy competition from other, smaller parks in the area, such as the beautiful Cypress Gardens and Silver Springs, the deliciously kitschy Weeki Wachee, Circus World Museum, Monkey Jungle and many other attractions.

Even with the ability to cut one's self off from the world via any number of electronic media, car travel with young people can either be a sublime memory to be forever treasured, or a lesson in torment that makes a root canal seem like a day at the beach. Before my stepsister moved out on her own, I'm afraid that travel was more like the former experience for my poor parents. But let's concentrate on the good memories, because those are more fun to write about.

My parents loved road trips. Any road trip, for any reason, was welcomed joyfully. A "plan" would go something like this:

Dad: "Would you like to go out for breakfast tomorrow?"

Mom: "Of course. Where should we go?"

Dad: "How about Michigan? or Illinois, or Wisconsin Dells, or Minneapolis, or (insert drivable destination here)."

In roughly 30 minutes, my mother would have all of us packed and into the car and away we'd go. We had no hotel reservations, no idea what our final destination would be, and no concern about it. It always worked out somehow, and that was part of the magic.

My mother always had an "activity bag" packed and set aside for me. Obviously, the contents changed as I grew, but the essential goal

was always the same: “to keep Grace quiet.” Coloring books and crayons (what station wagon doesn’t look marvelous with melted crayon on the deck?); whatever book I happened to be reading (thank Heaven I never suffered from car sickness); Auto-Bingo (oh how I loved that game); a doll or teddy bear – all the essentials.

In the back of our station wagon, we had a large cooler (with roughly enough provisions to sustain Valley Forge) and a portable propane grill. My father, never a fan of restaurant food, loved to have Momma cook a nice breakfast on a rest area picnic table or, failing that, on a flat rock with a pretty view. I often wonder why my mother considered these trips “vacations.” However, I must selfishly say that eggs and toast taste even better when eaten while sitting on a blanket and surrounded by the mists of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I have so many lengthy stories about individual vacations, but I’ll have to settle for sharing a few evocative notes which I hope explain why I look back so fondly. Happy memories include:

- The State Trooper in Tennessee who stopped behind our car to find out what we were doing (we were parked by the side of the road at 6:00 a.m. and my mother was cooking breakfast). He ended up joining us for our morning meal.
- The "nest" I made in the back seat of the station wagon, with my sleeping bag, pillow and teddy bear. When I was very little, my parents (who were always the earliest of early risers) would put me in the car while I was still in my pajamas, and I’d sleep for a couple more hours as they drove. Given that some of our trips commenced as early as 3:00 a.m., it made sense to them to have a few more hours of peace and quiet. Obviously, these were the days long before seatbelts and car seats.
- Jeremy, the tour guide at Mackinac Island, Michigan, who let me wear his hat and said “if you liked the tour, my name is Jeremy. If you didn’t, it’s Larry Lipshitz.”
- The small motel in Kentucky that bordered a farmer’s pasture. My mother went to the restroom and shortly afterward we heard a scream. It was only that a Holstein decided to keep Momma company by sticking her head through the bathroom window and saying “Moo.”
- The visit to Monkey Jungle in Florida, where one of the simians mistook my mother for a bathroom facility. I thought this was hilarious, though I’m sure my mother would put this experience on an entirely different list of memories.
- The time we ended up in a small town in Georgia, as the hotel owner where there was a good restaurant, and found ourselves seated at her dining room table, where we ate with the rest of her family. That is still one of the tastiest meals I have ever had.
- Visiting Niagara Falls at 6:00 a.m., and having it all to ourselves.
- All those “See Rock City” barns everywhere we went. Attempting to find one now is like a treasure hunt.
- Visiting my brother's ship when he was in the Navy, and stepping into the Atlantic Ocean for the very first time.
- Actual conversations. There were no walkmans, iPods or DVD players. Sometimes we talked about what we had just seen; sometimes we talked about what was outside the car window, but we actually communicated with one another, if you can imagine that.
- And this last one isn’t a happy or sad memory, but certainly a timely one. My father left a gas station in disgust when he discovered that they were charging the unpardonably high price of 93 cents a



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gallon.

Not everything was sunshine and hot dogs, of course, but as I get further away from my kid-hood, the happy memories are more vibrant than the bad ones. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about getting heat stroke in Washington, D.C. (on my birthday), or having to visit the emergency room in Rockford, Illinois. Nor do I dwell on the numerous sunburns, bad meals or boring "educational amusements" (an oxymoron if I ever heard one) that I encountered. It made me furious when I was small, because I was rousted out of bed for no good reason, but now I find it amusing that every single attraction we went to, we arrived at LEAST one hour (usually two) before it opened for business (I believe I mentioned that my parents were early risers). Nothing like being in parking spot 1-1 at the Magic Kingdom and waiting for the staff to show up and let you in. I am not making that up, by the way - we actually got to Disney World before Mickey did.



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Gas prices notwithstanding, traveling by car is still my favorite way to get around. It makes my traveling companions nervous when my answer to "where are we staying tonight" is "I don't know," but I find it delightful to drive until I'm tired and then find a nice place to stay. Granted, this doesn't work well during holiday weekends, but most of the time it's not an issue. I also love having the freedom to visit an attraction if I wish to, and not worry about a hotel reservation waiting for me 300 miles away. No schedules, no reservations, no worries. Lack of vacation time now forces me to fly more often than I'd like. I don't dislike flying, but I miss the scenery so much. I love having more days to spend at St. Simons Island, Georgia, but I wish I still had enough time to drive through North Carolina to get there.

I really enjoyed taking this trip down Memory Lane - I hope you didn't mind being taken along on the journey. It was nice to be reminded that there was a time in my life when I wasn't always in a hurry. If you have the freedom to take to the open road, by all means, go! Pack your camera and a change of clothes and off you go. You won't regret it.

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