

THE ROAD TO CINCINNATI

“Dad, can I help push? Please?”

“No, Adam” came the reply with uncharacteristic firmness.

Outside our marooned Ford Taurus wagon, a blizzard raged across Hogback Mountain in Southern Vermont. Dad calmly asked Mom to get behind the wheel, as he donned parka, hat, and gloves, venturing outside into the polar vortex to attempt to dislodge our vehicle. Evan and I silently inched forward from our helpless posts in the cavernous back seat with a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and the fear that we just might live out the rest of our lives as hermits in the Vermont countryside. Being 10 and 6 years old, I can see now how we would have been more of a hindrance than a help in pushing the car. My frustration with being unable to help that evening was quickly overtaken with other emotions. We were on our way to Ohio for our annual Christmas visit to Grandma and Grandpa, who anxiously anticipated our arrival. This was turning out to be one of the most adventurous journeys yet.

The strain of the front-wheel drive beast’s V6 engine pierced the otherwise supernatural silence that envelops the landscape on snowy nights in New England. After several unsuccessful attempts, the tires finally regained their grip, and we jolted free. Mom, taking advantage of the limited traction we did have, kept the car’s momentum going, and drove clear to the other side of the hill, leaving poor Dad completely alone to hike up and over in the whiteout, rejoining us on the western side of the crest. After 10 minutes or so, we finally saw Dad’s silhouette emerge; he resumed his post in the driver’s seat after carefully shaking off the ½ inch of fresh snow that had nestled in the wrinkles of his hat and jacket. The anxiety level finally dropped; the crisis had been averted. Only 16 more hours to go.

Growing up, it was simply a fact of life- we were driving to Cincinnati every Christmas... and every summer. Not that I minded- I looked forward to these trips with great anticipation because we got to spend 1-2 weeks visiting with Mom’s side of the family. The trips also provided a welcome change of scenery, and in some way kindled my love of travel from an early age. The westward march from New Hampshire typically took about 18 hours, and I accepted the slog generally without reservation. There seems to be something exhilarating about heading west, given the historical weight of what a westward American expedition represents. Even as a youngster, I delighted in Dad patiently showing me the route we’d be taking in our dog-eared road atlas, and eagerly counting up the states we’d be passing through. My excitement remained unfazed even after the predictable blank stares my friends would give me when I told them where we were headed on our family vacation. It is only now, as a father myself, that I am coming to appreciate the amount of planning and endurance that went into these family trips.

Doing some rough calculations leads to my awareness that over the course of 20 years, from the late 1980s after Evan was born until 2008 when we last drove out together, the family logged approximately 72,000 total miles on this road trip. If that number isn’t staggering enough, consider that half of those miles were tallied during winter months. The 72,000 miles represent the equivalent of nearly 12 *round trips* from NH to the west coast, almost exactly 3 times the circumference of the earth, or nearly 1/3 of the distance between the earth and the moon. Despite

the distance, frequently abominable weather, and profound fatigue, we never once had an accident. Oh, there were plenty of mishaps, spills, arguments, and pretty much every type of minor calamity imaginable over the two decades, but with few exceptions they stayed inside the car.

Through the years there became quite a collection of hilarious phrases uttered by all of us, none more famous than “soaked milk things,” angrily uttered by Dad in a parking lot, having pulled over after Evan or I spilled a carton of milk in the back seat, forcing him to dispose of the milk-soaked napkins (which I think is the phrase he was trying to utter).

Then there were the years in which we caged Tiger, our family cat, to bring her along for the ride. Staying true to her name, Tiger’s generally sweet disposition quickly devolved into behavior more appropriate for the African savanna, slashing and bloodying Dad on one occasion. After the typically tense battle involving hissing, shrieking, and multiple slammed doors (Tiger didn’t take it very well either), she was locked up, and we were treated to the mellifluous notes of her belabored mewing for the first several hours of the jaunt.

If you’re picturing us, an ordinary family of four, smiling, laughing, and having wonderfully peaceful interactions while in the diminutive confines of the car, you would be correct. For about 45 minutes. For the remaining 17 hours, Evan and I would have disagreements ranging from “he stole my toy” and “he hit me” to the ever more sophisticated drawing of an imaginary boundary line in the back seat and physically punishing each other when the line was breached by an errant foot or elbow.

Another wonderful memory I have of the trip is the unimaginably diverse assemblage of snacks Mom was able to cram into our little cooler; there was always a great assortment of salty and sweet, and these rations greatly helped break up the long, landmark-less hours.

Sightseeing was limited by the fact that the majority of the drive (especially in the winter) was done at night, and by the fact that, well, there really isn’t a whole lot to see on I-80 or I-90, especially when the intention is to just get to Cincinnati as soon as possible. We did, however, make a most exciting excursion in 1993, deviating briefly from I-90 to stop at Niagara Falls. As a lover of maps and travel, even at 11 years old, I was ecstatic at the opportunity to set foot in a different country for the first time. Foreshadowing my current love (some would say obsession) with studying maps and planning trips, I helped plan deviations in the later years to Toronto & Ottawa (2002), and Cooperstown, NY (2003).

My appreciation for the geography of our great country was enhanced while peering out the window for hours, seeing nothing but fields and barns in rural Ohio after catching glimpses of Lake Erie and the hulking industrial machinery of Cleveland. In some ways seeing these cities and landscapes give one a better sense of the US, as opposed to flying somewhere tropical, parking oneself on a beach, and participating in nothing but touristy activities for a week. That’s what I tell myself anyway. Authentic Americana!

Then there was the weather. As anyone who lives in northern New England, upstate New York, or anywhere where the term “lake effect snow” is spoken can attest, winter in these parts has its fair share of less than glorious weather occurrences. In addition to the Vermont snowstorm mentioned above (one of many encountered in that particular state), the time comes to mind in the early 2000s during which squall conditions became so unmanageable that entire

sections of the New York State Thruway were closed. I remember that night well; after several hours of white-knuckle driving, we finally relented and pulled off the interstate, plowing through 6+ inches of virgin snow on back roads and desperately seeking a motel. We finally found a run-down place near Amsterdam, NY. As we were in no position to be picky, we settled in to a fitful night's rest, awakening in the morning to reports of as much as 36" of fresh snow in a nearby town. Indeed, upon opening the motel door, I realized that we couldn't even get from the room to the car without shoveling a path through.

While at the time weather, family squabbles and other events were met with nothing but frustration, the lessons I learned on those trips, I'm realizing now, are truly incalculable. It's difficult to describe the impact of lessons learned without descending into the typical road trip clichés, but the 18+ hour journeys were truly symbolic of the extraordinary endurance necessary to persevere through troubled times that one never expects to last as long as they do.

Some of our trips, contrary to what I've been describing above, were remarkably uneventful. I remember a sunrise during one of our summer trips that was, to this day, one of the most magnificent I've ever seen. I awakened from my stint in the front passenger seat to look in the rearview mirror and see the enormous disc, perfectly circular and candy apple red, emerging over the horizon, casting a gentle glow to the central Ohio cornfields and reassuring me that the four of us weren't truly alone out on these desolate stretches of asphalt.

Whether it was snow, sleet, torrential downpours, or a perfectly clear day, I knew that we would get there if we just kept going. Applying this apparently simplistic mantra to my life would later become far more difficult than it was on a road trip, but the 'good things come to those who wait' cliché I've found to be profoundly true. Rather than wasting time complaining about an uncontrollable such as weather, we had our destination in sight and resolutely determined what we'd need to do to get there in one piece. And then we did it.

A slight smile would cross my tired face when we traversed the Ohio border; despite having no particular affinity or connection to towns like Conneaut, Ashtabula, or Willoughby, the knowledge that we were in our final state was invaluable. When, nearly five more hours down the road, we came around the final bend on I-71 and the Cincinnati skyline came into view, the excitement became palpable, as we vainly attempted to make ourselves look presentable by brushing off hours' worth of crumbs, combing our matted hair, and all popping some gum in our atrocious mouths.

When Evan and I were young, Grandma started a tradition of running outside and jumping up and down upon our arrival. Even before the age of cell phones, we could show up 3 hours earlier or later than expected and she would astonishingly be out of the house in seconds, eagerly awaiting us running up the front yard and into her outstretched arms. The noble quest of the epic biannual road trip would largely lose its meaning were it not for the warm, loving welcome we received upon finally pulling into Grandma and Grandpa's driveway. The reason for our quest having become abundantly clear and the accommodations lovingly prepared, we entered the house for a snack, relaxed conversation, and a very long nap. After a week or so of family fun, we'd be turning the car around and doing it all over again.