Westbound and down. . .

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of buffalo, dusty cattle trails where cowpunchers drove their steers to round-up. I saw the nude beaches of California. I sat down and had a drink.

Little did I then realize that an innocent two-week trip to New Mexico and on to California and covering but 6000 miles would fatten itself on Texas steaks and pinto beans until it doubled in length and girth and would take us to every state west of the Mississippi, excepting the small ommissions of North Dakota and Minnesota.

We prepared carefully for a week, then threw away half our gear and still had too much stuff. Under the hatchback of our brave mule we finally packed absolute necessities like cowboy hats, a case of beer—in a styrofoam cooler prone to leakage and mildew—a pair of dismal sleeping bags, and lots of beans.

We were also armed to the teeth with an original, mailorder vintage .22 pistol of the variety known to the irreverent as a "Saturday Night Special." It was lightweight and looked real; its one fault was that you could not hit anything with it.

Our goal was to see as much as possible in as little time on the least money, and to continue so long as we, the West, our money and our mule held out. My father agreed to provide the mule, an ill-shod 1976 Capri with a dubious clutch, a tape deck, a CB radio, and the all important air-conditioning. I agreed, in turn, to provide

Ranger guide at Mesa Verde

half the money, half the driving, and some music he could understand.

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With tired eyes I greeted my first—and to this day, my last—Tennessee morning. Memphis was less impressive in the daylight than at night. Likewise, the Mississippi proved to be more impressive in my expectations than in its actuality. There was not a single paddle-wheeler to be seen, though I craned my neck for a view all the way across the mile-long bridge.

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Eastern Arkansas is poor country. Shanties line the frontage roads along the interstate. Surrounded by junked cars and trash, they attest to the plight of those that farm the swampy fields that sweep from horizon to horizon, punctuated by clusters of trees, and rows of more shanties.

In the foothills of the Ozarks, near the town of Coal Hill, we stopped for gas at a small station that boasted a zoo. The zoo consisted of a bear and her cub, a baboon and her infant, the saddest assortment of peacocks imaginable and the world's largest collection of goat dung per unit area of parking lot.

The operator, sitting on a Pepsi crate, picked a banjo and spit tobacco juice in the general direction of a coffee can that masqueraded as a spitoon, while a younger employee pumped our gas. Both their situations I found superior to the bear's, who had no spitoon, and was forced to spit her tobacco juice on the ground.

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My father was most patient with my driving and my choices of gas stations and restaurants. I also had the deep sagacity to respect his. He left the CB to me, as I was more experienced with the particular dialect of that medium. Talking to "18-wheelers" and dodging "smokies" gave us some amusement for a while, but like a new toy it soon lost its novelty and fell into disuse somewhere around Oklahoma.

Many things seem to have fallen into disuse somewhere around Oklahoma. I refer specifically to trees and hills. As we crossed the Arkansas River into Oklahoma, we made our first acquaintance with a phenomenon peculiar to the Great Plains. Known to cowboys and truckers as "Oklahoma rain" the dust storm was perhaps the Sooner state's most distinctive geographical feature.

From the Ozarks to the Rocky Mountains, the land sprouted a windmill or an oil well more often than it nourished a tree. The land was as interesting as a psychology class, and true to form, I dozed off.

When I awoke, somewhere east of Oklahoma City, I noticed a beautiful blonde woman following us in a spanking brand new blue Cougar. Dad informed me that she had been following us for a hundred or so miles. I asked if he had spoken to her on the CB, and he said yes, but every time she said something the truckers gave her such a hard time that she had to be quiet or else be embarrassed off the air.

After negotiating a traffic jam through Okie City,—as it is affectionately known to Oklahomans—Dad picked up the CB mike and began talking in his own original style.

"This is the Green Capri to the lady in the blue Cougar. We are low on petrol and are going to stop at the next gas station, over?"

"Ten-four, I'm right with you," came the reply.

The truckers went wild, and the CB crackled with things unfit for the printed page. Ignoring them, we wheeled off at the next exit, and truly, she did follow us. We gassed up, and shared with her a six pack of "Colorado Kool-Aid"—known to the more pretentious as Coors beer.

Her handle was "Tumbleweed," and she would follow us to Amarillo, Texas, which was near her hometown of Canadian. We carried on a lively conversation for the next 250 miles, including a stop at a very convenient Texas rest area. We said our good-byes at when Dad and I peeled off the interstate to grab an Amarillo steak and find a place to rest.

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Five-and-one-half hours out of Amarillo we came to Santa Fe. I felt like I had taken a wrong turn at Tucumcari and ended up in Mexico.

In Santa Fe the houses were all adobe. In fact, everything in Santa Fe was adobe; the gas stations, the hamburger stands, even the shopping centers and the Ford showroom were constructed of that unique material.

The heart of Santa Fe is a large tree-shaded square, the plaza. It is surrounded on all sides by a square street. The street has several lanes, and pretends to be a freeway in the afternoons when it is choked with tourists, shirtless Mexican boys on motorcycles, and barrel-chested Indians with long black hair who have come to town in their pick-up trucks.

We lost our brakes in Santa Fe, and found a new master cylinder at the Ford dealership for $101.86. I was ready by then to leave Santa Fe, and depositing Dad at his school, I headed west. I promised to come back and get him a week later, after his school was over.

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The first day on my own took me to the Indian dwellings at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. The *Anasazi* Indians occupied Chaco Canyon about 1,300 years ago, and by the year 1,000, they had constructed the adobe apartments whose ruins I drove over two hundred miles to see.

Those who frequent the Indian ruins in the "Four Corners" country—where the corners of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona meet—learn quickly of the *Anasazi*. *Anasazi* is Navajo for "the ancient ones," the mysterious folk who built apartments out of masonry and wooden poles, then disappeared, and left them for the white man to wonder about.

After 39 miles on a dusty, deep-rutted cattle trail that the state of New Mexico flatters with the title State Road 57, I expected to see something spectacular. I was not disappointed. A ranger informed me that I was viewing the finest Indian architecture in the Southwest. He could have been right. For example, Chaco Canyon's largest ruin, the Pueblo Bonito, once housed 1,000 people in 800 rooms, and stood four to five stories high.

In the center of the Pueblo Bonito was a large, circular, semisubterranean room whose purpose no one seemed to know, but about which everyone speculated. These rooms, called kivas, are common to Indian ruins throughout the Southwest. Some of the more profane tourists suggested that the Indians built the rooms solely to confuse future archeaologists.

At Mesa Verde National Park in the southwest Colorado, I found ruins similar to those of Chaco Canyon. A narrow road winds up the face of the Mesa to pueblo apartments which have nestled on steep cliffsides for a thousand years. The road also runs to a motel, a gas station, a restaurant and a gift shop, all conveniently located atop the Mesa.

The Mesa Verde apartments have been abandoned for 600 or 700 years, and I don't wonder why. All across the Southwest, the fate of the Anasazi dominates both tourist literature and Park Service museums. Disease, drought, warfare, and just plain strife have been offered as answers. I think they just killed themselves off by falling down the cliffs.

After adventures that included a strip poker game in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, a snow storm in Telluride, Colorado, and playing hide-and-seek with a Colorado state trooper, I returned to Santa Fe in time to help Dad celebrate his graduation.

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Heading west and nursing our heads, we struck out on a route that in three days would take us to Las Vegas, Nev. by way of The Petrified Forest, The Painted Desert, Monument Valley, Sunset Crater and The Grand Canyon.

We had intended to hike into the bowels of the Grand Canyon by way of the North Rim, but several rangers assured us that the trail was impassable due to rockslides. We believed them—innocents that we were—and abandonded our plans for overnighting in the Canyon. But out of curiosity we hiked down the trail anyway.

After walking in a good mile-and-a-half, and down 2,000 feet, we came to the seditious rockslide guilty of spoiling our plans. Strangely enough, on the way down we met two hikers who had come up the very same trail, the North Kaibab Trail through Roaring Springs Canyon, from the South Rim. As we reached the slide, our direst suspicions were confirmed.

Thee had indeed been a slide across the North Kaibab Trail sometime within the past few years, but by the number of footprints, it looked like the Army of Northern Virginia had managed to hike its way over the treacherous slope.

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Las Vegas is a spectacle of lights by night. By day it is an ordinary ugly city. At dusk we topped a ridge several miles from the city, and beheld it like a neon star in the dark firmament of the surrounding desert. For $100 we saw the scantily-clad, Folies Bergere at the Tropicana Hotel, ate two meals, stayed in a motel, cautiously played the slots—slot machines to the uninitiated—and filled the car up with gasoline.

Across the Mojave Desert from Las Vegas lies California. I expected first to cross a wasteland of shifting sands littered with the bones of the unfortunate, then to climb a jagged mountain to gaze upon a land of milk, honey and Gallo wine.

We passed our first night in California by the shores of the Pacific Ocean Morro Bay.

The Pacific Coast Highway hugged the rugged coastline of the Big Sur country from Morro Bay to Monterey. The coastal mountains marched straight into the ocean all along the route. The road twisted and wound to climb 300 feet above the waves that wash the mountains' sheer, western flanks. The view was magnificent, and the traffic heavy.

Dwarfed by redwoods

San Francisco was not another dirty city. Row upon row, neat pastel-colored townhouses lined the rolling streets. Golden Gate Park was a green oasis in the heart of the city. Like nearby Haight Street, it was infamous as a haven for pan-handlers, the bravest of whom constantly plead with you for spare change. But if the unwary tourist relinquished a quarter, he was suddenly beset by a snivelling, wretched-smelling mass of humanity, all of whom demand—and obviously need—their rightful quarter.

At 4:45 we felt the afternoon rush hour coming on, and hurried out of the city on the forward edge of a rushing, honking, automotive tidal wave.

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We crossed the Sacramento Valley, which looks strangely like a piece of Oklahoma imported to separate California's two major mountain ranges.

On the back of our faithful mule, we climbed the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada to Lake Tahoe. Mark Twain described the lake as "a noble sheet of blue water lifted 6,300 feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft full 3,000 feet higher still!"

That was a hundred years ago, and his description still remained, accurate for half the lake. Nevada owned the other half and has turned it into a Las Vegas. Gleaming chrome-clad hotels rivaled the splendor of the mountains, and the traffic was atrocious.

photography
by Allen Jernigan

About 20 miles from Lake Tahoe was Virginia City, once the queen of Nevada's mining camps, home of the fabulously rich Comstock Mine. Nowadays she is less of a queen, and more of hustler, enriching herself from the yearly haul of 500,000 tourists. Virginia City indeed housed many wonderful attractions. We saw the very desk at which Mark Twain wrote copy for Virginia City's own *Territorial Enterprise*. In fact, we saw his copy desk twice, and in two different museums.

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We drove late into the night, our headlights dancing off the trunks of trees, or else spilling futilely into the dark void of the night sky. Our tired mule groaned up one hairpin turn after another, until reaching the mountaintop, where, she zoomed with squealing tires down the other side. This went on for an eternity, and then another. Bright-eyed deer stood frozen beside the road, all waiting, it seemed, for the most incovenient momemt to spring into our path and cause all concerned much discomfort. I convinced myself that we were traveling hopelessly in circles, for though darkness obscured the scenery, I began to recognize the same deer.

I found sleep impossible, as I continuously rolled from one side of the car to the other as we negotiated from turn to sharper turn at warp speeds. Long after midnight had come, gone and been forgotten, we found a Park Service campground, located between a stream and the highway.

Every few minutes, a fully-laden logging truck crawled up the mountain, its engine moaning, "I think I can, I think I can." Shortly thereafter, another truck flew down the mountain, its engine screaming, "I knew I could; I knew I could." I believed at the time that a cruel antagonist had paid the same truck driver to run up and down that mountain all night long. The stream proved a haven for hoards of mosquitos, who invaded the mouths of our sleeping bag and cruelly explored our bodies.

By the next day I felt so ragged and abused that I committed an unpardonable sin. Up to this time we had engaged in solemn philosophical debates, lively political discussions, family gossiping and the good-natured telling of lies. But showing a lack of subtlety brought on by utter exhaustion, I began to complain about my father's driving.

The gauntlet was thrown, for he could now comment on my driving, which is grossly inferior to his, except when he has consumed a pint of Chivas Regal and refuses to drive.

In such a state of affairs we reached Redwoods National Park. As I belittled his choice of redwood trees to visit he politely informed me that if I wanted to keep on being such a horse's rear, I could damn well ride in the trunk. I should never have been so unwise to remind him that hatchback cars don't have trunks.

We drove under a drizzling grey sky without speaking until we reached the Lady Bird Johnson Grove. Those trees loomed aloft nearly 300 feet, and many were upwards of more than 2,000 years old. Shafts of sunlight pierced the shrouding mist and streamed to the floor of this cathedral of forests. We strolled spell-bound through aisles of the pink blossoms of the rosebay rhododendron, chest-high ferns, and the massive trunks of trees shaggy heads were hidden in clouds.

When we left an hour or two later, we were once again on the best of terms, though we had not forgotten what we're fighting about.

Our farthest point from home was on the Olympic penninsula in the utter northwest of Washington. The peninsula is fraught with fanatic clam-diggers, lunatic logging truck drivers and silent Indians. The clam-diggers and the Indians seemed friendly enough, if one is wary and stays out of their way. The loggers were another matter, for they felt the highway to be their personal property.

The Hoh River valley in the Olympic National Park receives upwards of 150 inches of annual rainfall. The unique forest in that valley was appropriately

Snow in the Grand Tetons

called the Hoh River Rain Forest. It was a magnificently dismal place; it was dark, silent and amazingly lush. Vegetation was everywhere, and so dense that wind cannot penetrate to the interior of the forest. Hanging plants called epiphytes grew down from the trees to meet the growth climbing upward from the thick vegetable cushion that carpeted the forest floor. If someone told you the air was green there, do not doubt him too much.

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The next two days and 700 miles to Glacier National Park were marked by snow and a speeding ticket.

The Glacier National Park sits astride

the U.S.-Canadian border, and is best known for its unspoiled scenery and varied wildlife. I remember it best for its inhospitable weather, and for its grizzly bears, who proved even less accommodating.

Unscheduled in the ways of bears and the fine points of the northern Montana climate, we were not a little surprised to find both so unsociable.

When it did not rain, it snowed, and when it did neither, it did both. Yet the weather was infinitely preferable to the company of the bear.

We came upon the bear most unexpectedly. He was large enough to eat our poor mule for breakfast and have room left for Dad and me. He was the color of cured tobacco and had terrible breath.

Dad spied him as we turned a corner in the road. It was shortly after sunrise, and the fellow was feasting by the roadside on some sort of victim, possibly a very discolored ranger, though more likely some unfortunate species of plant.

We pulled up next to him to take his picture. Even as I snapped the shutter, the bear lunged at the car, and we beat a hasty retreat. We tried again moments later, with as much success.

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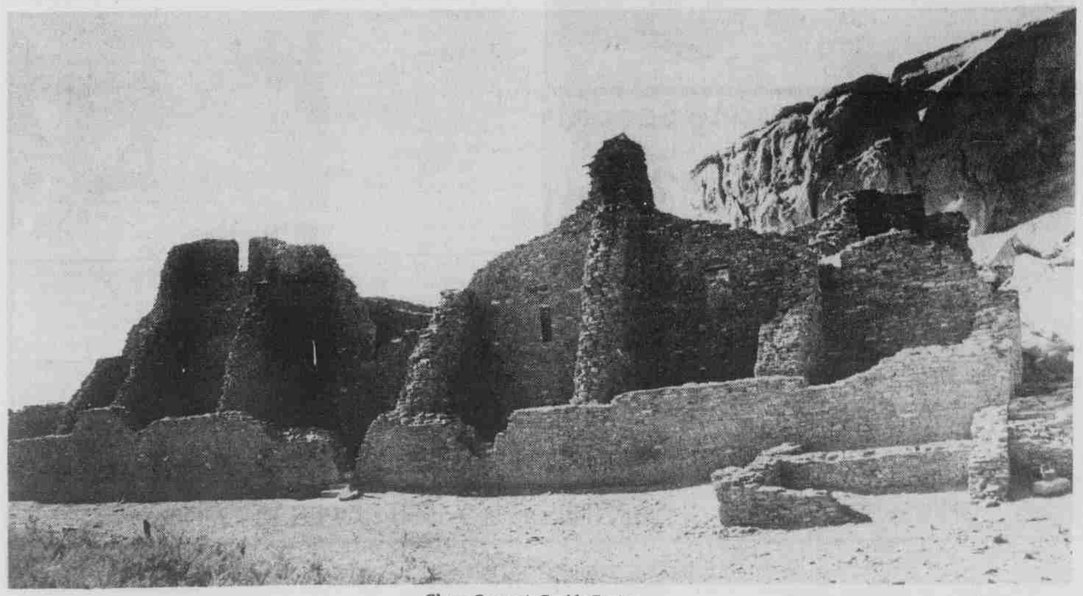
We departed northern Montana for northwestern Wyoming and the Yellowstone country, where we spent our second straight night in the snow. In the morning we viewed the Grand Tetons, who were indeed grand as their name implies. Their peaks clad in eternal snow, and their heads wreathed in clouds, they looked like a group of white-haired men gathered for a morning smoke.

Due north of the jagged Tetons lies tourist-infested Yellowstone National Park. We spent more time there staring at the tail ends of recreational vehicles than we did viewing the scenery. And if a publicity-seeking animal happened to step within sight of the highway, banish any foolish notion of further travel until everyone has brought his Instamatic to bear.

We ran out of gas in Yellowstone, due mainly to slow traffic and poor planning. Friendly people stopped and aided us; even the insane who blocked the road to feed the bears were friendly. But if you visit Yellowstone between May and September, bring your patience and a cooler full of brew.

From Yellowstone to Raleigh, our journey took three days. Our last tourist stops were the Custer Battlefield and the South Dakota Badlands. We took our time to Kansas City, then it was Katie-bar-the-door, for we struck out eastwards at what the truckers call a "rapid rate of hurry." 22 hours out of Kansas City we saw a Carolina sunrise for the first time in 23 days.



Chaco Canyon's Pueblo Bonito