

ROADMASTER

By John S. Halbert

"When Better Automobiles Are Built, Buick Will Build Them . . ."

---Buick Advertising Slogan---

Late May, 1957:

One Friday near the end of my sixth-grade school year, I left the school grounds in a quandry. Daddy was supposed to pick me up after school and take me somewhere---but where was the DeSoto? It should have been easy to spot: it was the only white DeSoto in town with the rear smashed-in. A car's horn blew down the street. I looked but didn't see anything familiar in the line of vehicles. Another quick series of horn blasts directed my attention to a big blue automobile half-way down the block. There was something familiar about the driver, who was waving his hand at me: the man behind the wheel was my father! But where did he get *THAT* car? I broke into a run and arrived a few seconds later as he was starting the engine.

"Hop In!" he smiled. "How do you like our new car?"

"*OUR NEW CAR?*"

It was not exactly brand-new---but it was only a couple of years old---it was a Buick---it was huge---and it was *OUR'S!*

"Our's and the bank's!" daddy corrected.

"Well! This is a *REAL* improvement!": I looked around inside the impressive vehicle. In front of me was a dashboard unlike any I had ever seen. Engine gauges flanked a circular speedometer; on the right side of the panel a clock matched the speedometer; a radio presided above the center of the dashboard with five push-buttons spelling out B-U-I-C-K. At the top-center of the windshield, directly over the rear-view mirror, was a knob that controlled the outside radio antenna that could be rotated downward. The headliner was real red leather with chrome bolster strips. We sat on seats that were a red-leather-and-light-gray-broadcloth combination; my shoes sank into a plush dark-gray hog's-hair carpet. The steering wheel was the biggest I had ever seen: a full eighteen-inches in diameter with chrome spokes and a bold hub bearing a gold figure of an old car and the inscription, "BUICK 50th Anniversary."

And *everything* was power-operated: Power Steering, Power Brakes, Power Windows, even Power Seats! The two-tone hardtop had no center pillars along the sides---when the windows were down the vistas were totally open. Up front, the car was announced by a long, important hood preceded by a wrap-around, chrome-laden bumper and a grille that was unmistakeably Buick. Under the hood was the first-ever Buick V-8 that proclaimed its presence with a lusty surge of power when daddy gave it the gas. The crowning glory of the car were its four decorative holes in the fenders. A "Four-Hole Buick"! A Roadmaster---Top of the Line! The car *oozed* chrome and class. The machine looked massive, heavy, and powerful.

I was in a kid's Automotive Heaven! How far we had come in a couple of years from

hole-in-the-floor "Bessie Bee"---bless her memory---but this big Buick Roadmaster was an *AUTOMOBILE!*

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Before long school was out and summertime beckoned with its wondrous three-month vacation from alarm clocks and nagging teachers. The school doors had hardly slammed shut behind me when our family was on the road in the Buick---destination: the Florida Panhandle. As none of us had ever before been to Florida, and neither my sister nor I had ever seen the ocean, it was with great anticipation that we headed south. By late afternoon we arrived in Mobile and drove around. It was hard to believe we were still in our home state---the Port City was notably different from what we were accustomed to back in North Alabama. The air even smelled different---a salty aroma tinged with a faint suggestion of flowers. Many of the streets had French names; with palm trees and Live Oaks laden with Spanish Moss that flanked many of the brick-paved thoroughfares. Intriguing, balconied old buildings with wrought-iron balustrades, and magnificent white-columned antebellum homes testified to Mobile's exotic and historic past. We had never before seen a city like *this*!

The next day we drove over to Fort Walton Beach, Florida, which had the whitest sand I had yet seen. (*Or would ever see, except for the "white sand" at White Sands, New Mexico, which is actually powdered gypsum.*) After playing and splashing in the surf for a few hours, Daddy became impatient to get going, so we bade the Gulf of Mexico farewell and turned the Roadmaster northward.

In a few hours we were in Montgomery, and on our way home.

The next day we toured Birmingham, and high atop Red Mountain we stopped at "Vulcan", the largest iron statue in the world. Looking up, I was astonished to observe that the great "Roman god of Iron", in a posture of appearing to address Birmingham from his lofty pedestal overlooking the city, was not wearing anything under his short tunic!

That evening we went to a Birmingham Barons baseball game at '*Rickwood Field*'. There were several thousand spectators at the historic old wooden park but it was the pre-game show that was most remembered. The attraction was a performance by George DeWitt, who had a very popular television show at the time called '*NAME THAT TUNE*', and a voluptuous blonde actress named "Dagmar", who appeared on the field in a slinky white dress that presented her very considerable physical assets with dazzling clarity. The television host and the actress jitter-bugged to a number of popular tunes and the show was eye-popping, to say the least. The cantilevered Dagmar nearly fell out of her dress a couple of times during the performance and it was several innings into the baseball game before the audience's collective blood pressure settled back to normal. (*Cadillacs in the 1950's had front bumpers with two enormous chromed bulbous protrusions. They were popularly known as "Dagmar Bumpers" for a very good reason.*)

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This short but enlightening trip began a tradition that continued for several years in which we took progressively longer journeys in the Buick each summer.

In those days one of the most popular of American coins was the fifty-cent piece. (*Now rarely seen.*) Daddy had an idea: Save all our half-dollar coins, put them in a jar, and in a year, they could amount to enough to pay for the next vacation! (*Fifty cents was worth a lot more at*

that time, considering that regular gasoline, for example, cost less than thirty cents a gallon .) We hoarded the coins in a big jar in a closet for all the next year, and, sure enough, the following summer the total was several hundred dollars! Daddy converted the fifty-cent pieces into traveler's checks and we had our own version of a pre-paid vacation!

Our appetite for Florida had been whetted by the previous summer's quick excursion into the panhandle, so we planned our next vacation trip as a far more ambitious journey to completely tour the state. Then, as now, there was a mystique about Florida that was touted, even in those days, as a place different and exotic. We left our hometown early on a Monday morning and as we drove our big blue Buick out Second Street Road we heard a loud "CRACK!" that mother wrote down in the "Trip Log" she was keeping as the "Crack of Dawn!" We never found out what the noise actually was---it probably had a logical explanation---but it fit the occasion perfectly and thereafter we always referred to that particular vacation trip as having started at "The Crack of Dawn."

Our journey took us down through southeast Alabama and Southern Georgia. Once again, we entered Florida, this time a couple of hundred miles to the east of last year's panhandle visit. After a while we crossed a bridge over a narrow waterway identified by a sign as the 'SUWANNEE RIVER.' The sign cleverly featured a series of musical notes on it that translated to the first bar of the old Stephen Foster song from the early-1800's, '*Way Down Upon the Swannee River.*'

The Roadmaster covered 585 miles that first day, our longest single-day's journey ever, arriving in the late afternoon in Lake City, Florida. Next door to our motel was a quaint diner decorated with 'fifties-period chrome and neon, where I was introduced to Veal Cutlets. (*Decades later, when I was again in Lake City, the diner was still there---still looking the same.*)

We left our motel early the next morning and had breakfast at a place called '*THE RED BARN*'. It actually *was* a red barn, with quaint and humorous curiosities all over the place.

Leaving the unusual eatery behind us, daddy swung the Buick back onto the highway and we headed southward into farmland with horse ranches one-after-the-other along the way. The scenes reminded us of the familiar Kentucky and Tennessee horse farms we had seen on the trips to our relatives in central Kentucky, except that Florida's farms were on flatlands.

We had gone only a few miles when daddy glanced at his rear-view mirror and did a double-take. "Look at this guy passing us! His tire is on fire!" Sure enough, a sedan shot by us a few seconds later, its right-rear tire trailing black smoke and a shower of sparks. Daddy hit his brakes to allow the distance between the other car and ours' to increase as it appeared the wheel would explode any second.

Although we took it for granted that we would soon pass him pulled off the highway with his car in flames, we never saw him again. Surely he could have not gone much farther with his smoking and sparking tire, but his fate always remained a mystery to us.

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Shortly afterward we passed a gaudy billboard that proclaimed:

WELCOME TO AFRICA!

"*Africa?*" Daddy slapped his forehead. "We took the wrong road!'" Actually, it was an advertisement for an amusement park with an African theme, and was the first example of the

sensational billboards we would see just about wherever we went in Florida. Another recurring sight was that of leather-faced retirees who obviously spent incredible amounts of time in the sun, rendering their skin into something resembling the texture of brown leather shoes and leather belts.

In the late morning the Roadmaster glided slowly through Gainesville, past '*FLORIDA FIELD*', the home stadium of the University of Florida Gators' football team.

After lunch in Gainesville, we continued on down the road to Ocala, where we spent a couple of hours at '*SILVER SPRINGS*'. It was exactly as advertised---the glass-bottom boat gave us razor-sharp images of the bottom of the watery cavern, and the botanical gardens were a riot of flowers and greenery. Behind a moat was an island covered with dozens of alligators sunning themselves. A sign told us that all the reptiles had been captured nearby, which caused my sister a lot of worry until an attendant assured her that the creatures rarely ventured into a populated area. Next door was an intriguing place: '*ROSS ALLEN'S SERPENTARIUM*', the so-called "Snake Farm" about which I had already heard so much. Inside were the biggest snakes I had ever seen, including one massive constrictor that was touted as the largest snake in the world, an "Anaconda" that must have been thirty feet long. But what *really* impressed us most about the "Ross Allen" place was a full-sized picture on the wall depicting *the outline of a man inside a huge snake!* It had swallowed someone whole who was in the stomach of the enormous reptile! A constant parade of awestruck people came by and stared at the stupefying spectacle.

We spent the night in a motel a few miles out side of Ocala, regaining our composure.

The next day Daddy headed the big Buick southwest through flat, aromatic citrus fields toward Tampa Bay. In the early afternoon just outside of Plant City we ran into a terrific thunder and lightning storm. A bolt of lightning struck a power pole just as we drove by it and fire flew all around us.

In St. Petersburg we visited our former next-door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Pyron, at their trailer home in a retirement village surrounded by palm trees. By that time, he had replaced his redoubtable 1948 Chrysler with a newer vehicle. Speaking at his usual rapid-fire pace the peripatetic Mr. Pyron said he planned to tour the country in a new-type vehicle he had designed and was building at a small factory he had erected nearby. It combined a truck chassis and engine with a camper body---he said he planned to call it a "Motor Home." (*Mr. Pyron's original ideas for campers and motor homes were far ahead of his time. In a few years, large companies would emerge and produce huge numbers of travel vehicles and campers such as our clever former neighbor had originally envisioned.*)

He promised to visit us in Sheffield as soon as he finished his project, but his wife passed away soon afterward, and as it turned out that was the last time we ever saw the Pyrons.

Next morning daddy aimed the Roadmaster's majestic prow southward over Tampa Bay's spectacular "Sunshine Skyway Bridge". It was a clear, warm day as we motored leisurely down the Florida West Coast. At Sarasota we stopped at the '*Ringling Museum*' and saw "The Greatest Show On Earth's" winter quarters. In Fort Myers we drove past Thomas Edison's winter home, where the great inventor had rested from his labors of devising light bulbs, perfecting talking machines, inaugurating motion pictures, and all his other thousands of creations.

At Naples, the road turned easward and the Buick embarked across the Everglades on an arrow-straight thoroughfare called the "Tamiami Trail," a two-lane road that carried us into a humid, seemingly never-ending swamp teeming with all sorts of wildlife. Exotic flamingoes and other birds stalked around in the shallow, murky water, ignoring the traffic zooming by them just a few feet away. There was an occasional alligator sunning itself and once we had to swerve to

avoid running over a big snapping turtle that was scuttling across the roadway.

Midway across the Everglades we stopped at a combination service station and lunch counter that had a huge four-engined airplane perched on a pylon atop its roof. It was an astounding spectacle that was visible for miles in both directions up and down the highway.

And, there were the airboats. Also known as swampboats, these odd-looking, blunt-nosed, flat-bottomed craft had a wicked-looking radial airplane engine mounted high on the rear of the boat coupled to a two-bladed wooden propeller with a shroud around it. They looked for all the world like fishing boats with a large electric fan on their backs. All over the Everglades we saw these roaring motorized flatboats skimming along at breakneck speed. Evidently they drew only a few inches of water---perfect transportation in those shallow, treacherous, unpredictable waters.

We were amazed at how many people actually lived and worked in the swamp, as we had expected to find it practically uninhabited. Instead, the Everglades were home to sizable numbers of rugged-looking people who appeared to be involved in fishing, trapping, and running the exorbitantly-priced eateries and gas stations. Every few miles on one of the small islands that dotted the swamp we would come upon a few houses and an occasional store advertising gasoline and other items at frightful prices.

Except for these isolated scraps of civilization, the whole place had almost a kind of primeval, prehistoric look to it---right out of a dinosaur picture book. One could almost expect to see a '*Brontosaurus*' interrupt its feeding, lift its head out of the water, and stare at us.

When we arrived in the western outskirts of Miami, Daddy pointed the Roadmaster southward through the section near the airport. We passed the University of Miami, which, as it turned out, wasn't even in Miami at all, but in Coral Gables.

In late afternoon, we settled into the "Briny Breeze Motel" at Key Largo, one of those typical, late-'fifties plastic-and-neon Florida beachfront operations with sand all around---on the sidewalks, in the lobby---we even tracked it into our room, where the floor was at exactly the same level as the beach outside; the door to our room opened right onto the beach.

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By now, our overall opinion of Florida was that it was an interesting place; very scenic and enjoyable, with the exception of the restaurant food, which we considered to be greatly overpriced. Mother observed that her impression of Florida could be summed-up as "*Hotels, Motels, and Cocktails!*"

The next morning we got an early start down the '*Overseas Highway*', over a remarkable succession of bridges that connected a string of tiny islands---the Florida Keys. The highway hop-scotched from islet to islet over the water for over a hundred miles from Key Largo to Key West. Mother said it reminded her of a big, real-life, "Connect-the-Dots" game. In a couple of hours we neared our objective: Key West. As we entered the eastern outskirts of the town we passed a big sign:

WARNING---WATCH FOR LOW-FLYING BLIMPS

Grinning, daddy turned around to say something to me about the sign, but at that moment the sunshiny day became twilight! Startled, I looked back through the Roadmaster's rear glass and saw a three-foot-diameter *tire* hanging in midair over the roadway only about ten feet behind

the car's trunk lid! Looking up, I was astonished to observe the broad silver-gray undersides of a U.S. Navy "Blimp" passing directly over our car, with the tips of a pair of flashing propellers just outside the window on both side of us! Craning my neck, I looked upward out the side window at the bottom of the bulging airship's control car where two roaring engines hung on pods a mere few feet above the top of our vehicle. As we stared agape, the huge motorized balloon moved stately over our Buick, crossed the highway, and cleared a fence. A few moments later the single wheel touched-down on a paved ramp alongside the highway. As we drove past, several dungaree-clad sailors ran out and grabbed ropes dangling from the front of the airship. The last we saw of them they were tying it to a vertical mooring mast. What an introduction to Key West that was!

We drove into the island town, which billed itself as '*THE SOUTHERNMOST CITY IN THE UNITED STATES*', which, at the time, it was. (*In 1958, when we were in Florida, Hawaii was about a year away from statehood. A small village on the South Coast of the Island of Hawaii later became the southernmost town in the country.*)

After lunch, the four of us splashed on suntan oil, spread beachtowels. and prepared to soak up some of Key West's sunshine. But it didn't take us long to realize the beach was not as great as we had expected it to be. Compared to the pristine white beaches we had seen the previous year at Fort Walton Beach, Key West's was a big \disappointment. The gritty sand was dirty, felt vaguely oily, and here and there trash and flotsam had washed up on shore from somewhere out at sea. Even the seagulls and the pelicans didn't look particularly healthy. We soon lost interest and decided to walk around the shoreline for a while.

Looking out to sea, we observed a parade of cruise ships a few miles offshore sailing southward. We found out they were headed to Havana, only ninety miles away, which was still a big tourist destination in that last idyllic summer before Castro's Communist Revolution shut the door to Americans. (*Fidel Castro took control of Cuba in January, 1959---about six months after we were in Key West. Daddy always said he regretted we did not take a short cruise to Havana that time when we had had the chance.*)

Leaving Key West's unsatisfying beach behind us, we headed downtown, where the little city's charms offered more promise. Key West was, compared to its beach, clean and well-kept. Palm trees lined narrow streets crammed with small, white-painted ginger-bread bungalows. We drove by former President Truman's "Summer White House," which was still there as a tourist attraction.

As Key West was on an island a hundred miles from the mainland, there was a continuous salt-air breeze. The numbers and varieties of flowers we saw in bloom was impressive. Key West had the appearance of a lived-in botanical garden.

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Mother and daddy wanted to spend the night in Miami, which was 150 miles back up the Overseas Highway. As it was already mid-afternoon, we piled back into the Buick Roadmaster and headed eastward. At the city limits we again passed the U.S. Navy Blimp Base. This time there were no airships about, which must have meant they were all out at sea doing whatever blimps usually did.

In four hours we re-traced the island-hopping road and arrived back in Miami. Daddy drove up to an expensive-looking motel to inquire about a room for the night. In a few minutes he came

back to the car with a key in his hand and a grin on his face. "Would you believe . . . in Miami, this is the *off-season*! I got this room for ten bucks!" No wonder he looked so pleased with himself!

That evening we rode around Miami and drove over to Miami Beach, which looked as we had imagined it---even at night when the whole place was ablaze with lights. As we drove around, we made an interesting discovery: The Miami traffic lights were speed-synchronized---below each traffic signal was a lighted sign telling motorists how fast to drive in miles per hour in order to arrive at every traffic signal on a green light! (*Two decades later, when I was again in Miami, the traffic signals were still speed-synchronized as before. It was a marvelous method of traffic control that I never saw duplicated anywhere else. UPDATE: on a visit in 2004, I found that the speed-synchronized lights were gone.*)

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The next morning we drove across the causeway to the famous '*SEAQUARIUM*', an aquatic park with a show featuring dolphins and other trained animals. After the performance, we ventured down onto the grounds where there were shallow pools of sharks and other dangerous fish swimming literally at our feet. We arrived just in time to observe the sharks' feeding, which whipped the deadly beasts into a frothy frenzy.

After yet another hamburger lunch, daddy eased the Buick up Collins Avenue past the famous Miami Beach hotels, including the '*Eden Roc*', the curved '*Fountainbleau*', and all the others. That afternoon we stopped in Boynton Beach, where daddy serviced the Buick and by late afternoon we had made it up the coast to Juno-By-The-Sea, where we settled-in at a very different kind of beachfront motel from what we had been accustomed. It was across the highway from the shoreline and was connected to the beach by a tunnel that ran underneath the highway.

Early the next morning before we checked-out, we decided to go for a sunrise swim in the Atlantic. Everyone donned their swimming outfits and dashed through the tunnel onto Juno Beach. At full speed the four of us splashed into the incoming surf---and turned right around and ran back onto the beach. *The water was ice-cold!* Wasn't it supposed to be warm? This was South Florida, for heaven's sake! And whatever happened to the warm Gulf Stream? The icy breakers put a quick end to our swimming at Juno Beach.

After our encounter with the chilling waters of Juno-By-The-Sea, we decided it was time to head for home. Having passed the one-thousand-mile mark on the trip the day before, we were beginning to be a bit homesick. Besides, we missed our dog, whom we assumed missed us too and who was probably wondering by now what had happened to us.

Leaving the icy waters of Juno Beach, we skirted Lake Okeechobee, swung across to the centerline of the state, and headed northward. At lunchtime we stopped at Lake Wales and visited the Bok Singing Tower, a tall carillon bell tower set in a fragrant orange grove. After a musical concert, we watched the water ski show at nearby Cypress Gardens. By nightfall we had made it all the way to Live Oak, in the far northern part of the state, only a few miles to the west of Lake City where we had spent our first Florida night. Late the next afternoon the Buick delivered us safely back home, to a joyous reunion with our dog.

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Pretty soon it was back to school and another year of saving half-dollar pieces in the big jar in the closet. That winter, there was much discussion among us as to where we would go next summer. Mother wanted to go out West, as we had never been beyond the Mississippi River. Daddy pushed for the Great Lakes and the East Coast. After more talk, we decided to take a trip to the Midwest and Up East, taking into account the amount of time daddy would have for his vacation. This route would include stop-offs at our Kentucky relatives and a visit with Uncle James, who had moved to a town near Chicago. All winter, the door to the closet opened and closed with the regularity of a metronome, and the "clinks" of the big coins landing in the jar testified to the growing pile of half-dollars, as day-by day, our next pre-paid vacation came closer to reality. Finally, school was out again, and we readied for the big journey. As daddy's vacation was later in the summer that year, it would be mid-August before we could start. Thus, the anticipation and the build-up for the trip went on all summer long.

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When we were traveling, daddy always re-topped-up the gas tank when the gauge showed about half-a-tank remaining. When it was getting along toward time to make a refueling stop, we had a contest to see which of us would be the first to spot the familiar Orange Disc of a "Gulf" station. In those days, going to the service station was a considerably different experience compared to the later, lackluster "self-service" era. In the late-'fifties everything was done by actual service attendants. As soon as our Buick pulled up at the gas pump, a hustling squad of immaculate men in dress uniforms dashed forward pell-mell with sponges, buckets, and pressure gauges. At a dizzying pace one man flung up the hood, pulled out dipsticks and checked all fluid levels. Meanwhile, a second attendant hurriedly tugged an air hose around the car, making sure the tires were correctly inflated. (He even opened the trunk and checked the *spare* tire.) At the same time, a third man swabbed the windshield, including the inside of the glass. Yet a fourth serviceman pumped gas into the tank. All the time, the men kept smiling and behaving as if they were actually glad to see us! When it was all done, daddy paid with his Gulf Oil Credit Card; still a novelty in those days. For years, the standard price of gas was around twenty-nine cents a gallon. (*Later, on this same trip, in Ontario, Canada, daddy fumed when he had to pay the "exorbitant" price of FORTY CENTS A GALLON for gasoline!*)

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Our trip started out with the visit to Campbellsville, complete with the detours in Nashville, that were by now becoming standard procedure. After a few days at the farm, and fortified by the great-tasting food as usual, Daddy became anxious to get started toward Indiana Harbor, Indiana, just outside of Chicago, where my Uncle James lived.

Preparations included a morning phone call to my uncle, not as easily accomplished in those days as at a later time, because direct-distance-dialing had not yet been perfected. It took several minutes to complete the call, as it had to be handled manually by a series of operators. First daddy called the local Central telephone exchange, which initiated a long-distance sequence. Operators called from city-to-city, hop-scotching along the line northward. The accents became more "Yankee" at each turn, until after several minutes, he finally heard my uncle's voice. They were waiting for us in northern Indiana.

We said our good-byes to the Kentucky relatives and headed the Roadmaster northward. By

late afternoon we reached Indiana Harbor, which hugged the southern shore of Lake Michigan, near the southeast side of Chicago. My Uncle James, Aunt Gertrude, and cousin Marlene lived in a narrow, two-story brick duplex on a stone-paved street of identical dwellings, a few blocks from the steel mill where he worked.

A neighborhood contingent, seeing the Alabama license plates on our Buick, dropped-by and said their "hellos." It was a friendly neighborhood, and their greetings were a better reception than we had expected. Truthfully, we had been a bit apprehensive about going "Up North," as in those days in the late-'fifties there were still a lot of rivalries and misunderstandings between the North and the South. To complicate matters, my uncle was a jokester when it came to his Southern background---he actually had forewarned his neighbors that his poor relatives from Alabama were coming to visit him in Indiana, and would they please excuse the fact that we didn't wear shoes? Everyone had expected to see us haul-up in a horse-drawn wagon and alight barefoot! It took a lot of convincing before they believed us when we insisted that this Buick was *our car* and not a borrowed vehicle, as Uncle James glibly insisted to everyone. All during our visit he kept up a non-stop line of patter to his neighbors about our supposed hillbilly background, which we had to refute at every turn.

Jan, a winsome teenaged girl about my age with short, blonde hair and a scattering of freckles across her nose, lived in a duplex across the street from Uncle James's house. At first, she was bashful, but soon opened up to us and we became friends. Jan had an appealing manner that could have been described as tomboyish-cute. Frances and I talked with her a lot and we thought she was pretty neat. But all the time my irrepressible uncle kept up his patter about how in Alabama supposedly no one wore shoes; the only transportation were wagons, buggies, horses, and mules; how everyone lived in a log cabin. She believed a lot of it until my parents, exasperated, invited her to come to visit us in Alabama and see for herself that we had a normal society that included the wearing of shoes! (*Much to our disappointment, Jan never came to visit us, although she almost did a number of times over the next several years---something always happened to upset her plans. Later, she moved to Las Vegas and became a secretary at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Many years afterward, I was in Las Vegas on business and located Jan's office. But the day I was there---she was on vacation.*)

The next day we drove into Chicago and went to the '*Lincoln Park Zoo*' and the '*Museum of Science and Industry*'. For hours we rode around the city in the Buick, passing the '*Water Tower*', traversing '*Michigan Avenue*', and taking-in the sights on '*State Street*'. There was a flurry of excitement as the Saint Lawrence Seaway had only recently opened and the first ocean-going ships were just arriving in Chicago. We drove past some of the freighters that were docked in the '*Port of Chicago*'. It was quite a novelty in '*Chicagoland*' to have real ships from all over the world as far inland as the "Windy City" and the news reports on local television (in living black-and-white) were agog at the spectacle.

At the end of the day, we headed the Roadmaster back toward Indiana Harbor. On the South Side near '*Comiskey Park*', the home stadium of the '*Chicago White Sox*' baseball team, we passed by the '*SEE YOU LATER FUNERAL HOME*', a name that became forever a part of our traveling lore. Daddy even drove around the block to double-check the name just to make sure we had read it correctly. Sure enough, there it was--in big bold letters on the front of the building, the "See You Later Funeral Home".

Being from the South, some of the names associated with Chicago impressed us due to their "Northern," sounds. Place-names such as "*Euclid*," and "*Calumet*," among others, sounded almost "foreign" to our Southern ears, with a definite "Yankee" ring to them.

That evening, we sat around in my uncle's living room and watched a baseball game on television. Up to that time, I didn't realize that local games were broadcast live---I had never before been in a Major League city when a baseball game was in progress. What made the televised game memorable for me (aside from the sheer novelty of the broadcast) was the behavior of the game announcers. The pair opened the game normally enough, with appropriate comments as would be expected. But as the contest went on, there was a gradual and noticeable change in their announcing style. By the middle-innings their speech had become slurred, their complexions flushed (remarkable, since this was black-and-white television), and their comments increasingly ribald. A clue to this metamorphosis seemed to lay in the fact that the game was sponsored by a popular local brand of beer. It was pretty obvious that the play-by-play announcers were imbibing the brew as the game went on. By the end of the game, the florid sportscasters were practically hanging out of the booth; their hair unkempt; their ties slung askew around their collars; the microphone wobbling on the edge of the window sill that overlooked the grandstand; their speech practically unintelligible, and they seemed to be having a hard time locating the TV camera. (We were not sure if they were even aware of what kind of ball game they were trying to describe. Nevertheless, as Uncle James told me, these guys were extremely popular with the Chicago viewers.

Later, my uncle and I sat around the kitchen table and talked about the ethnic makeup of his neighborhood. The local citizens, he said, were, for the most part, Eastern Europeans who were a generation or two removed from the Old Country. He wrote the name of a co-worker on a paper napkin and pushed it over to me. "Pronounce this name," he grinned. I read his notation: "*CYSCZ*", which he said was spoken as if it was spelled "*SIS*."

Not to be outdone, I brought up the name of a friend of mine back in Sheffield whose last name was spelled "*KRYSZCZUK*." My uncle never came close to the correct way to pronounce it, which was "*KRIS-JACK!*" It was the actual name of a great guy about my age whom I had known practically all my life and whose mother was a long-time friend of my mother.

As Uncle James worked in a steel mill, he related to me the processes to make steel. It all sounded mysterious to my young ears as he used words such as "*Sinter*," and "*Rolling Mill*" to describe the methods by which the plant made steel. It sounded so involved that I never completely understood what he meant, but it certainly *sounded* important.

All the while as he regaled me with the tales of his neighbors and his steelmaking he smoked cigarettes non-stop and drank cup after cup of black coffee. He remarked that his diet was mostly coffee and cigarettes and I believed him, for I never saw him actually eat a complete meal. It was always the same: coffee and cigarettes. No wonder he had such a wispy frame, for which he compensated with his dry wit and droll humor.

After a late breakfast the next morning, we headed toward Gary, a few miles from Indiana Harbor. On the way, we drove by the huge chemical and refining complexes at Whiting, Indiana, that spewed white and gray clouds of reeking waste gases into the air. The whole district was marked by a nose-tingling, eye-smarting smell that tracked us down even inside buildings. By the time we reached downtown Gary, the smelly air was as bad as ever. How could people live and work in such an odorous place? We finally decided that the unpleasant air didn't seem to bother the locals---indeed, after a while, we hardly noticed it ourselves.

The *appearance* of Gary, however, was another matter. We voted it the plainest, most unappealing city we had yet encountered. (I had yet to see "Winslow, Arizona"; as dismal a town as there ever was and another story, entirely.) Perhaps it was because in the meantime it had become a cloudy, featureless day. Whatever it was, we didn't linger long in Gary.

We left Indiana Harbor early the next morning, for by now we were ready to take a momentous step for us---our first trip outside the United States. This time, Mother was driving and she set a fast pace eastward on the '*Indiana Toll Road*', the main thoroughfare across northern Indiana. (Mother always drove faster than daddy.) We had just passed South Bend, with the golden dome of the '*University of Notre Dame*' visible from the highway, when we fell into a crowd of vehicles that were moving along much more slowly than mother preferred. At length, she saw her opportunity and swept the big Buick around a Volkswagen. But a few minutes later, the same "VW Bug" forced its way past us again, with the driver grinning at us. The tiny car seemed to be taunting us with a bumper-sticker that gloated:

YOU HAVE JUST BEEN PASSED BY 36 HORSEPOWER

I saw mother's jaw tense and her eyes narrow. Teeth clenched, she swung the Roadmaster into the passing lane and gave it the gas. Our 185-horsepower machine shot past the VW and mother, having proved her point, *slowed down to seventy-five miles an hour*, leaving the Bug's driver gaping open-mouthed at our automobile's vanishing backside. The big Buick's name---'*ROADMASTER*'---was never more appropriate!

With Mother's foot pushing hard on the accelerator pedal, the massive vehicle ate the highway miles like an asphalt meal as our big blue Buick barrelled across northern Indiana. In a mere couple of hours we arrived in Toledo, Ohio, where we turned northward toward Detroit. Before long, it was evident we were nearing the "Motor City", for as we crossed the state line into Michigan, we saw dozens of empty auto-hauler-type trucks headed in the same direction, presumably to pick-up more cars for delivery across the country.

* * *

In a short while, we arrived in Detroit, where we turned *SOUTH* in order to cross the border into Canada. Although the United States lies generally south of the border separating the two countries, Detroit is actually north of an underslung portion of Ontario. Therefore, we crossed into Windsor, Ontario through a southbound tunnel underneath the Detroit River. As soon as we re-emerged into the sunlight, we were confronted by Canadian Customs. Their courtesy was impressive--after a few polite questions and a quick approval our car's registration papers, with a tip of their hats to us the smiling officials waved us past the Custom's Station. We were on our way! (*Canadian Customs has an international reputation for courtesy. Sadly, U. S. Customs, in many instances, has the opposite reputation.*)

Daddy took the wheel and maneuvered the Buick through the streets of Windsor, which, at first, looked about as much as any city in the United States. But after a while, we began to notice some subtle differences. For one thing, distances and speeds were measured in kilometers and kilometers per hour. Gasoline was priced much higher in Canada than in the 'States---daddy found that out in Windsor when he paid the astronomical sum of *FORTY CENTS* per gallon at the station that accepted his Gulf Oil credit card. Another thing we discovered was that United States dollars were worth more in Canada, due to the exchange rate that was very much in our favor.

The air felt noticeably cooler and more brisk north of the border. Notwithstanding the northern latitude, as we headed out of Windsor on "Highway 3" and passed into prosperous farmland, were astounded to observe *citrus groves!* The climate was evidently just right for

cultivating orange and grapefruit trees along the north shore of Lake Erie. We were a long way from Florida, which was where we had last seen citrus farms---yet, here they were---alongside the highway and toward the shoreline, all the way up here in Canada.

Our drive took us through one quaint little town after another. In St. Thomas---a fairly good-sized place, actually--everything appeared to be stretched-out on one street. All afternoon long the Buick rumbled eastward through Tillsonburg, and other towns, and on across southern Ontario. By late afternoon we started looking for a place to stop for the night. It was then we learned that it was the horse-racing season in southern Canada, and there was no place to stay. Finally, after a stretch of frustrating stops and inquiries, we found a cramped, musty, old-fashioned motel in Simcoe, complete with a black-framed screen door and a plain white stucco exterior with absolutely no shrubbery or decoration.

After freshening-up and resting a bit (we had driven 442 miles since leaving Indiana Harbor early that morning), we piled back into the Buick and drove around looking for a restaurant. We finally settled on a nearby diner because of their advertised daily special: "Southern Fried Chicken". But after one bite, it was obvious what they acually meant was "Southern 'CANADA'" fried chicken, for the taste was completely different from what we were accustomed to back home.. But regardless of its peculiar (to us) flavor, we ate it anyway because we were so hungry!

* * *

Next morning, the Buick deposited us at Niagara Falls, Ontario, site of the world-famous waterfall. We boarded the '*Maid of the Mist*', an excursion boat, for an hour-long ride underneath both the curved "Canadian Falls" and the shorter, but equally energetic "American Falls". Donning rain-slickers the boat provided, we watched awestruck as the plunging, twisting, bobbing boat edged right up to the deluge. The fog-like mist was so heavy that we passengers---a couple of hundred of us on this particular ride---looked like ghostly apparitions to each other, even though we were standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the deck. The plunging Niagara thundered over the jutting, jagged precipice above us with a stupendous roar that made speech nearly impossible, no matter how loudly we yelled at each other. All the time, the foaming, raging torrent crashed into the bounding bows of the stalwart, shuddering little ship, sending silvery sheets of water shooting back over us. Nearby, underneath the arched International Bridge, swirled the huge,dark, sinister whirlpool, rotating in a muddy, malignant, watery pirouette that looked as if it was trying to suck everything down to the very center of the earth.

After we mopped the water out of our eyes, we re-boarded the Buick and drove across the International Bridge back to the the United States. As we had nothing to declare, we had no problem clearing Customs. But as we drove through the gates into New York State, in the next lane U.S. agents were giving another vehicle a complete physical inspection. The motorists' luggage was open and inspecting agents were rummaging through everything in painful detail in front of everyone.

We lunched at a restaurant overlooking an enormous clock made of thousands of blooming flowers. The colorful clock's time was correct to the minute, a remarkable achievement, considering it must have weighed several tons, including the live flowers plus their beds. Whoever had designed and put it together was a mechanical as well as an artistic and gardening genius.

By now it was early afternoon, and we still had a long way to go this day. Again, mother took the wheel and the Buick rumbled through Buffalo. Soon, we turned southward and picked

up the pace. Before we had traveled but a few miles, we concluded that New York, for all its touted power and influence, had the most poorly-paved highways we had yet encountered in all our travels. There was something incongruous to have a Deep South family passing such negative judgements on what at the time was one of the nation's most populous and powerful states, and a Northern one, at that.

In the south-central part of New York State we passed through Corning, home of the '*Corning Glass Works*', makers of the famous "Pyrex" cookware. It was interesting to observe that Corning Glass's next-door neighbor was the big '*Wurlitzer*' factory that made juke boxes and theater pipe organs. (*Sometimes unlikely companies are neighbors. For instance years later, I drove through an area south of Milwaukee, Wisconsin and passed by the 'Harley-Davidson' motorcycle works, whose next-door neighbor was 'Johnson's Wax'. And in the town of Palmer, Massachusetts "Parker Brothers", makers of the famous "Monopoly" game, was right next-door to the "Tampax" factory!*)

* * *

A few miles south of Corning we crossed the state line into northern Pennsylvania, and in the late-afternoon we wearily rolled into Williamsport, which proclaimed itself as the

--HOME OF THE LITTLE LEAGUE WORLD SERIES---

We found a motel room and unloaded the Buick's trunk for what seemed like the umpteenth time on this trip. (We always emptied the car of our belongings each night for security reasons.)

A nearby diner featured an intriguing item on the menu that was described as "The World's Largest Hamburger."

"Sure--of course!" we smirked, discounting the claim. What would out-of-the-way "Williamsport" know about big burgers? After all, weren't we the travelers here? Hadn't we eaten countless brands of hamburgers over much of the eastern half of the United States? As much as to prove their claim wrong as to take care of our hunger, chuckling, each of us ordered one of the so-called "World's Largest Hamburger."

Our laughter stopped a few minutes later and our eyes bulged when they delivered the food. For the hamburgers were monsters that overhung the edges of our regular-sized plates with buns that were four-inches high! Inside each burger was a steak-size slab of ground beef topped with a whole garden of vegetables and sauces. To rub it in, the grinning waitress handed each of us a steak-knife and a fork. "Eat!" she commanded with mock-seriousness, holding back a grin, "before you fall into a dead faint!" So much for disbelieving the little restaurant's claim. These really *HAD* to be the world's champion hamburgers!

Groaning, we dragged ourselves back to the motel room and prepared to sleep-off the oversized meal. But only about a minute after we turned off the lights, the room suddenly turned into daylight again, the floors and walls shook, and a roaring noise blasted our eardrums! A second, and then a third semi-truck thundered past the window only a few feet from our room!

Daddy hopped up and looked outside. In a few seconds he closed the door, frowning. "Guess what!" he groaned, "we're at the bottom of a hill where the highway makes a turn right in front of our window! I guess it's going to be a long, loud night! Put a pillow over your head!"

Unfortunately, daddy was correct. Our room was located where cars and trucks had to make an abrupt left turn just a few feet from where we were trying to sleep. As each big rig plummeted

down the long hill its headlights flooded our room with light, as the curtains did nothing to keep it out. When a truck driver applied his brakes, the engine howled, followed by the trailer's shuddering and screeching of its tires as each vehicle roared past our window. This went on all night, and by the next morning we felt like we had not gotten any sleep whatsoever---which was probably close to the truth.

We were a staggering, bleary-eyed bunch who went to breakfast the next morning---it took several refills of coffee to get us going. At check-out Daddy complained to the clerk about the all-night truck derby right outside our window. The response from the desk agent was an indifferent, "Yeah, that happens, sometimes---!"

With everything stashed aboard, daddy maneuvered the car out onto the same curve that had caused so much misery the night before and headed southward. As we drove out of the valley, an early-morning fog still hung over the lowlands and all we could make out in the dawn's enveloping mist were the hazy, jutting chimneys of houses, treetops, and the roofs of some of the downtown buildings. Goodbye, Williamsport, Home of the Little League World Series! Goodbye, World's Largest Hamburger! Goodbye, roaring trucks! Hello, Highway!

* * *

At mid-morning, we passed through Harrisburg, with its domed State Capitol, and soon were deep in the heart of the "Pennsylvania Dutch" country. From time-to-time we had to slow down and make way for an Amish horse-drawn buggy with its black-clad passengers. After lunch in York, by early afternoon we crossed the state line into Maryland. At Baltimore, we picked up the Baltimore-Washington Turnpike and aimed the Roadmaster straight at the Nation's Capital.

Midway between the two cities, we received our first exposure to high-speed inter-city rail. With a sudden, swishing roar, a silver-sided passenger train shot past us on the adjacent tracks at terrific speed. Even though mother's heavy accelerator foot had our Buick racing along at seventy miles an hour, the streaking stainless-steel steed left us practically standing still. I had no idea trains traveled so fast---in a matter of seconds it ran away from us and vanished into the distance.

After a surprisingly short drive between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., in another hour daddy took the wheel for our drive down Pennsylvania Avenue. The sight of the huge Capitol Building at the end of the thoroughfare was unforgettable for all of us. Being late in the summer, some of the leaves were already showing signs of changing into fall colors. In those days, in the late-1950's, streetcars---those ubiquitous trolleys---were still running in the Nation's Capital. (*The next time I was in Washington, in mid-March, 1963, the streetcars were gone.*)

Daddy steered the Buick across the Arlington Memorial Bridge into Arlington, Virginia, where we settled-in at a major-name motel. Mother picked up the telephone and made arrangements for tomorrow's guided tour. After watching a funny movie on the "Philco" black-and-white TV, we turned-in.

* * *

"HONK! HONK!"

I knew right away it was a Cadillac by the front "Dagmar Bumpers" of the enormous limousine as it swept up to the motel lobby's front entrance. Even as it screeched to a stop, a wiry

old guy in a chauffeur's uniform hopped out and hustled up to where we stood under the awning. "The Halberts? You the Halberts?"

We nodded, and before we could say as much as a word, he snatched open the rear door and motioned for us to get into the car. Frances and I took the two jump seats and mother and daddy slid into the cavernous back seat. As soon as we were inside, he slammed the door, ran around to the driver's door, and fairly leaped behind the wheel. Before we could take another breath, the massive limousine lunged out of the driveway into the thoroughfare traffic.

"Name's Gadd!" he called back to us, turning around in his seat and holding up two fingers. "O.E. Gadd! Two 'd's!" He turned back facing the direction the car was going just in time to swerve around a double-parked delivery truck as his gargantuan machine gathered speed. Mr. Gadd kept talking: "We'll be picking up some more people and then we'll be on our way!"

A couple of minutes later, he twisted the steering wheel and the huge vehicle bounded into the parking lot of another motel. Two adults and a teenaged girl were standing curbside in front of the entrance. After another screeching stop our driver again leaped out and herded the trio into the back seat alongside mother and daddy. In a jiffy we were underway, again.

"Getting acquainted time!" our agog chauffeur put in as we sped into heavy traffic. "Name's Gadd! O.E. Gadd! Two 'd's!" He held up two fingers. "What's yours?"

We told our new acquaintances our names and they told us theirs. They were Greek-Americans named "Pappagoulos" from Buffalo, New York, and, like us, they had never before been in Washington, D.C. Their slender, olive-skinned daughter, who was about my age, with dark, flashing eyes and long, shiny, swishy, black hair, right away caught my attention. I could see that she was *very* attractive, and resolved to try to talk to her as the day went on.

Mr. Gadd's barge-like car roared down the freeway at breakneck speed toward the Potomac Bridge. In a few minutes we were our first stop---The White House. He let us out and told us to be back at the same spot in an hour. With that, he put the big Cadillac in gear again and zoomed off. After touring the Presidential Mansion, in exactly an hour we returned to where he had originally deposited us. At that precise moment, Mr. Gadd's colossal car whooshed to a stop in front of us.

"Get in!" he directed, pulling open the rear doors. In scant seconds we were on our way. "Had another load of folks to pick-up and deliver!" he explained. After a while, we figured he was shuttling three separate groups of tourists around the city at the same time, picking up and delivering each carload in turn. The peripatetic Mr. Gadd ("two 'd's") kept up this routine all day, as in turn we visited the Capitol Building; the National Archives---where we saw the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; The Bureau of Printing and Engraving, where they were printing "two-dollar" bills that day (the only day of the year they did so, according the guide); The Smithsonian Institution, and the Supreme Court Building.

At the latter stop the young Buffalo beauty accidentally left her camera on the front steps. We had already gone several blocks before she discovered her loss--could we *please* go back and get it? Mr. Gadd flipped the big limousine around in mid-block and shot back in the direction from which we had just come. As we again pulled up in front of the Supreme Court Building, incredibly, her Kodak box camera was still there. I hopped out to retrieve it and in a few seconds presented it to her. The girl's dazzling and grateful smile was the highlight of my day, as far as I was concerned.

As it turned out, that was the closest I came to connecting with the girl that day (I didn't even get her first name). For the second time on this trip (blonde, freckled "Jan" back in Indiana Harbor was the first), I faced insuperable obstacles in the way of future involvement with

someone I had found interesting. And after that day in the Nation's Capital, we never again saw or heard from the Pappagouloses. from Buffalo.

In the late afternoon, Mr Gadd, still overflowing with boundless energy, dropped us off back at the motel.

* * *

Fortified with a sunrise breakfast, the next morning we drove around some more, visited the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier" at Arlington National Cemetery, and saw the Pentagon Building. With a full tank of gas, in the early afternoon we bade the District of Columbia farewell and aimed the Roadmaster toward Alabama.. The next day we arrived home for another joyous reunion with our dog.

~

* * *

In two years, I was in the eleventh grade and got my first real paying job as a part-time electrician's helper. That same year I took my driver's license test in the car. In November, I had my first real date with just the girl and me and the Buick.

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* * *

We had the Buick for one more year until I was in the twelfth grade, when the miles and the years finally caught up with it as had happened with "Bessie Bee" and "Ol' Snort". Daddy traded it off for another Buick, this one a gigantic four-door "Super" that was loaded with gobs of chrome and had more interior room. But no matter how many cars we had or would have in the future---there was no other car that quite matched the connection to action and adventure that we had with our big, wonderful, 1953 Buick Roadmaster.