

THE LONG, LONG TRAILER

CLINTON TWISS

1951

WE BOUGHT a trailer - the kind you live in. A long, long, long trailer.

Neither my wife nor I had had a vacation in ten years; but we had banked vacation money every year. Now we decided to withdraw the balance and squander it all in one mad fling – a two-year trip! We would divest ourselves of all obligations and head for wide open spaces. We would clip along the shores of mountain lakes, wallowing in fresh air and scenery. We would scale the highest mountains and there, in majestic solitude, shut out the telephone and radio and television and bill collectors.

The price of the trailer, the ads soothingly assured us, would be only \$2000 – for a completely self-contained portable home.

On the opening day of the trailer show we were the first in line. We spent hours going from one exhibit to another. It was getting dusk when we saw it. No, we didn't rush up to the salesman clutching a roll of bills in our hands. It was a good two minutes before I wrote out a check for \$4200 and thrust it at him with palsied fingers.

“The budget!” Merle murmured.

But by this time I had completely lost my head. “The hell with the budget,” I said expansively. “We own a trailer!”

We leased a parking space in a North Hollywood trailer park. I cunningly selected a lot directly in front of the wide driveway – where I wouldn't have to back up. We paid the \$25 monthly rent, gave up our apartment and, taking along only our clothes and a few keepsakes, moved into our new rolling home.

Merle had measured with her eye the size of the closets and our racks of dresses and suits. The solution to the oversupply of clothes was quick and uncomplicated. She sold six of my suits to the old-clothes man for \$5 each and threw in four pairs of my shoes. Like Magic, there was now plenty of room in the trailer closets for everything.

The bleached mahogany glistened in the sleek interior. The twin beds were comfortable. Six windows down each side gave an excellent view of the countryside. Over each bed was a bookshelf, at the end of each a full-length closet the doors of which opened and locked in the center, isolating the bedroom from the rest of the quarters.

The kitchen was a marvel of efficiency. The oval bathroom was most impressive; it contained a small aluminum sink, medicine cabinet, an aluminum floor, and a shower curtain that encircled the entire room.

In the living room were the thick yellow rugs and a green chair. The utility table folded down from the wall. The davenport ran nearly the full eight foot width of the trailer.

It was a remarkable home, all right, one that promised much in comfort and future adventure.

But there was one catch. I was continually smashing my head into the top of the five foot door. In or out, I never failed. Departures weren't so bad, since the manufacturer had thoughtfully lined the inner side of the door with rubber; but withal an increasingly deeper dent in my head was becoming apparent. Merle tried to help me, but never got beyond "Look out for the —"

Whap! Right in the same crease.

I NOW planned to take the trailer out on the highway for a series of trial runs, for I was still ignorant of the intricacies of trailer-towing. -True, I had driven it over from the factory, but I had been in a condition of shock during the entire trip; it had instilled a kind of quiet horror that grew hour by hour. The conviction loomed that this monstrous piece of aluminum was the master and I the servant. And so we came to call it The Monster.

I tried to join nonchalantly in the conversations of the old trailer hands in the park, but it was all too apparent that I had no place in that inner circle. The old hands merely assured me there was only one way to learn and that was by hooking on the trailer and towing it. Whenever the subject of backing a trailer came up, they would shake their heads sadly and walk away.

Merle kept badgering me to set a date for our departure. The thought of towing the two-and-a-half-ton, 28 foot Monster even the 310 miles to Modesto, Calif. - which was to be our first stop - was appalling. But finally I confessed there was nothing further to keep us from taking off.

"D" day was Monday. "H" hour 4 a.m. It might just as well have been 2 a.m. or even midnight. I lay in bed in a cold sweat the entire night through. The slightest sound sent huge shots of adrenalin through my frame. The minute hand raced around the dial beckoning me to my doom. Exactly on the hour, Merle raised her head and announced, "It's four o'clock."

Somehow I got into my clothes and somehow I found myself rolling up the drains. I disconnected the light cord, turned off the water, unblocked the wheels, folded the jacks, turned off the butane. This was it!

I STEPPED gingerly on the accelerator. The motor revved up, but nothing moved. My hands began sweating. Maybe the weight was too much. Maybe the tires had grown to the ground. Frantically I plunged the gas pedal to the floor. Flying gravel clattered against the front of the trailer and The Monster leaped off the lot like a startled gazelle.

I wrenched the wheel around and we seemed to be moving down the boulevard in a straight line. We rode along in complete silence, ears attuned for any telltale foreign sound that would warn us of the imminent collapse of both car and trailer. Nothing happened.

Here we are, I thought, on the road all of two minutes without accident or breakdown. I was considerably bucked up by this miracle. We were skimming along at a good eight miles an hour.

I stepped her up to 15, then 20. I had a death grip on the wheel. Then I peeked into the rear-vision mirror - and my hackles rose. In the mirror the trailer looked like a huge monolith bearing down on us at a breakneck speed. I looked away quickly. I didn't realize the thing was so close. I got the feeling we were no longer towing it - it was pushing us!

"Is it still there?" asked Merle.

"Yes, I think so.

"You think so. Don't you know?"

"I'm afraid to look."

"Why?"

"It scares me - it looks like a freight train bearing down on us.

"What if it breaks loose - what would you do?"

"I don't know. The man didn't tell me."

A Greyhound bus roared by and nearly sucked us into the baggage compartment. "What if we have a blowout?"

My hands were getting sticky. "We've had blowouts before."

"Yes, but what if it was the trailer?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. The man didn't tell me."

Merle blew. "The man! The man! I'm sick of the man!"

"So am I!" I shouted. "And don't keep needling me. We haven't had any real trouble yet and maybe we'll never have any."

What a statement that was!

The fact that two picture windows, front and back, gave me clear vision through the trailer turned out to be a great comfort. I could watch approaching vehicles with ease, and thereby avoid the nerve-racking convulsion that always seized me when a hitherto-unseen car whooshed by at 65.

By ten o'clock the July heat was becoming oppressive, and Merle ordered a stop. While she changed to lighter clothes in the trailer, I consulted my watch. At the rate we were traveling, I calculated, it would take us two years to reach Albuquerque.

On the road again, I decided to step up our speed to 25 miles. I had no sooner made the decision when a car zoomed by us. I shuddered and squinted into the rear-vision mirror - I couldn't understand why I hadn't seen it. Two more cars roared by and I looked again in the mirror. I couldn't even see the highway! I gasped. My eyesight, I thought, it's failing me - a thing I had feared for years. It meant the end of the trip, of course, and I hated to tell Merle. But finally I let her know.

“My eyes,” I said, heaving a sigh. “I’m having difficulty focusing in the rear-vision mirror.”

With this, Merle sat up ramrod-straight. I gave her a weak, understanding smile. I’m bearing up very well, I thought, under the circumstances.

Merle slowly turned and looked back at the trailer. Then she looked at me. “I forgot and left the blinds down after I changed clothes,” she said. “That’s why you can’t see through the trailer.”

We drove into Modesto in stony silence.

MERLE’S whole family was standing in front of the house, with the neighbors, acting as a welcoming committee. Since we looked like the Super Chief, they had no trouble in spotting us two miles away.

As we pulled to a stop, everybody congratulated everybody else. From the gasps of amazement, we began to feel we had accomplished a feat far surpassing Lindbergh’s flight to Paris. While Merle regaled the gathering with our hair-raising exploits, I tried to act the modest fellow. “Nothing to it,” I kept repeating. “Absolutely nothing to it.”

It was Pop who pulled us up short with the news that he had prepared a spot for the trailer in front of the garage, at the end of the driveway. “Back in, unhook the car, and you’re all set.”

My knees sagged perceptibly. My mind tried to grasp the enormity of his proposal. Back the eight-foot-wide trailer 100 feet down a nine-foot driveway? Me?

I tried to look efficient as I walked out in the street and surveyed the driveway. A huge climbing rose was espaliered against the side of the house, and several of its branches overhung the driveway. “We’ll have to prop up that rambler,” I said, with a ring of authority.

In less than a minute the rambler was pruned, propped and nailed. I could postpone the backing no longer.

On my first attempt I managed to get the left-rear wheel on the driveway, but the right-rear wheel creased a four-inch-deep furrow across the virgin lawn. Then I cramped the wheels in the opposite direction and cut another deep furrow, which left a V-shaped gash.

The second attempt was little better. The rear end of the trailer persisted in going in a direction exactly opposite to my calculations. Perspiration streamed down my face as I knocked down a small orange tree. I was becoming panic-stricken.

For more than an hour the rig defied every attempt to get its rear end up to the garage. I had plenty of advice. Since I had demonstrated my ineptness at backing up, everybody felt free to offer suggestions. But nobody agreed on what I should do.

I made one more attempt to pull myself together. I asked for complete silence and got out of the car to trace the action of this articulated monster from front to back.

“Now,” I said, “I’m going to take her straight back - all the way!” I strode confidently to the car. Pop gave me a weak smile of encouragement. Mom, that sweet little lady, had the slightest trace of a puzzled frown.

Gently, I let out the clutch. I stepped on the gas - too hard! The car leaped back - I seized the wheel and turned it a little to the right.

“No! To the left!” they shouted. “No, right - now left.” “Hold it!” “*Look out!*”

There was a crackling of timbers falling - a shudder went through The Monster and there was a thunderous splintering, ripping and tearing. Then - deafening quiet.

It was at this point that Mom made the statement which she has subsequently denied. She rushed up to the car and hammered with her fists on the door.

“My rambler!” she screamed. “You tore down my rambler with your goddam trailer!”

The mob was so nonplused by this outburst that one by one they slunk away. Only a few staunch friends stood by - a sufficiently muscular group to help me unhook the trailer and *push* it back to the garage.

AFTER a pleasant fortnight marred only by minor crises, we once more set our departure time for 4 a.m. The early hour was decided on so as to avoid the mob - I had heard a nine-year old in the block telling one of his chums, “Pa says we gotta find out when he’s gonna leave. He says we don’t wanna miss seein’ what this fella does to a trailer.”

We negotiated the fearsome hundred feet down the driveway without incident, except for the uprooting of a geranium which I had somehow missed backing in. Then we quietly slid off toward Nevada.

At dusk, several days later when we were 50 miles from nowhere, I made the dramatic announcement: “This is the place.”

We pulled off the highway onto the desert itself. Our front yard was a hundred square miles of sagebrush and sand. Our bedroom window framed a towering mountain range and the fast-sinking sun. Here we were, on the desert, alone. Here was our opportunity to determine if the trailer was a complete self-contained unit. The sun finally went down and soon a cool night breeze crept over the desert.

The lights in the trailer came on. The floor furnace was lighted. The oven got busy and there was a friendly clatter of pots and pans. We prefaced the evening with a Martini, while the wine was chilling in the refrigerator. *This was living!* Everything worked - the bathroom, lights, water pump, butane.

The moon sent a pleasant glow through the window as we lay in bed reading. Soon came the final click of the light switch and all was quiet.

It must have been about three o’clock in the morning when I felt the “clutching hand” on my arm. Several times each year Merle brings me to a leaping-standing position on the bed in this manner. At night she seems to acquire an inhuman grip, and I always come awake roaring, feeling I have just lost an arm to a crocodile.

In a sepulchral tone she rasped, "Listen!" I listened. There was a weird howling just outside the trailer.

"Wolves," she breathed.

I could almost see the ugly, dripping fangs of the beasts, but breathed back, "There are no wolves on the desert."

"Then it's snakes," she whispered.

"Snakes don't howl," I whispered back.

She switched to her "voice of doom" tone. "Then it's coyotes, that's what it is - coyotes! *Get the gun!*"

The weird siren like howls were becoming more pronounced and seemingly closer. I slipped out of bed and made a tour of the 12 windows, gun at the ready and Merle close behind me. No coyotes.

"But I can still hear the howling," Merle insisted.

There was no denying that. The howling was there, and close.

"The bathroom window - we missed it."

She was right. Cautiously I approached the bathroom and carefully opened the door. The howl leaped out at me. It was coming from the toilet - the wind was whistling up its pipes. I had forgotten to put out the drain hoses.

We went back to bed and lay awake all night listening to the coyotes in the bathroom.

BUT IT was difficult to be glum next morning over a sizable portion of ham and eggs. While Merle did the dishes, I took my morning constitutional on the desert. It was while I was thus occupied that the plan came to me. I raced back to the trailer, burst in and pointed dramatically to the desert.

"Look," I said. "Look out there!"

Merle leaped a good foot straight off the floor. She thought I was pointing at coyotes. "I don't see anything," she said.

"Desert," I breathed. "Hundreds of square miles - no white lines, no driveways, no ramblers. We can rehearse starts and stops. We can even" - I took a deep breath - "learn to back up!"

Merle was a little wary. "What," she said, with just the barest hint of suspicion in her voice, "do you want me to do?"

I tried to be casual. "Do?" I said. "Why nothing. Of course, it would be helpful if you'd just follow the trailer around the desert and tell me how I'm doing - that's all."

"That's all," she shrilled. "*That's all!* You want me to run my legs off leaping over cactus, falling down gopher holes and maybe stepping on snakes? -No!"

I reminded her of the havoc wrought at Modesto. I painted pictures of wonderful side trips we couldn't take because we were unable to handle the rig properly. I pictured

beautiful trailer parks we couldn't enter because we had never learned to back the trailer. I agonized over the ignominy of being sneered at by our fellow trailerites because I was too ignorant to control the thing. And, in the end, Merle relented and agreed to follow The Monster around and tell me what I was doing wrong.

We did starts and stops until I could get the rig rolling and bring it to rest without an agonizing succession of jerks. My confidence rose and we switched to turns - an operation of sweeping circles, which required the observer to run alongside the hitch between the car and trailer. During this phase, four stops were required: twice to give the observer a rest; once to permit the emptying of sand from her shoes; and the last, when she stumbled and fell into what I romantically called a buffalo chip. At that I lost my observer completely. No amount of persuasion could get Merle to resume her post.

I had to practice the most important thing on the agenda - backing up - by myself.

WE HAD a new confidence on the highway as we traversed a beautiful wooded countryside beside the Little Salmon River and entered Idaho. Time and again we pulled up alongside the stream to bury our noses deep in its cooling water and gulp in huge draughts. We couldn't understand why everybody in the world wasn't doing the same thing.

We rounded mountain after mountain until the highway, a little heady from the rarefied atmosphere, decided to take off right up a perpendicular hump. We were a good mile into the grade before we knew what was happening. Merle realized it first and with a shriek pointed, "Look! Look-at-that!"

There, stretched out before us, was a series of double-hump, hair-pin turns that ascended the mountain vertically in giant strides, then seemed to disappear in a layer of cirrus clouds; I had never before realized that you could get to heaven on U.S.95. Merle snapped me out of this thought with the clutching hand.

"What are you going to do?" she asked shakily.

I noted the pronoun "you." I felt alone. Obviously, the thing was no longer a joint enterprise.

We couldn't turn around. We couldn't hack down the steep grade. There was only one thing to do - climb the mountain.

Merle shuddered and I shifted to a lower gear. The motor was laboring hard. The switchbacks were coming thick and fast. There were switchbacks *inside* of switchbacks. There were times I was sure I was staring the tail lights of the trailer straight in the eye. The occupants of the few cars we met, headed down hill, sat in startled wonder as we labored by. Merle added a funereal note by counting the wrecked cars lying in the bottom of the canyon.

Forty-five minutes later, with the gas indicator leaning against the empty mark, we reached level ground and started down a long incline into Grangeville. We stopped at the service station in a trailer park and filled up. The owner, an affable gentleman, wanted to know where we had come from. I nodded in a southerly direction and said, "From the south, and over quite a hill, too."

The owner straightened up with a startled look and sprayed gasoline all over the rear fender. "Not Whitebird!" he said.

I looked a little superior. "We didn't inquire the name, but it was quite a pull."

His mouth was gaping. "You're a damn fool," he said. "Even *little* trailers wait till night to come over Whitebird. *Big* trailers don't come over it at *all*. The last one that tried it is in the bottom of the canyon.

I gulped.

"And you came over it in the heat of the day - with this?" He tapped The Monster with a forefinger.

My mouth was too dry to swallow, but I managed a nod.

"You're lucky, that's all I gotta say - you're just lucky."

I tottered after him into the office and registered for the night. I didn't feel equal to towing the trailer any farther that day.

THE bright summer morning cast a whole new light on our exploits of the previous day. I began to enjoy my position as the local hero who had towed The Monster over Whitebird Hill. Trailerites in the park gathered around our rig to admire and be advised. I was the new oracle, the new authority on trailers. To questions, I gave out offhand replies which implied that we encountered a Whitebird or its equivalent every day.

Merle was pretty disgusted with my attitude. I tried to explain what exhilarating stuff I was feeding on. For the first time, somebody was asking me about trailers, not telling me. She listened patiently, but I guess women don't understand men very well.

My most devout subjects were Mr. and Mrs. Bonham of Sioux City, Iowa. The Bonhams had long ago decided to spend their retired years in a trailer - but they were very unhappy people. Mr. Bonham had committed a grave error. He had purchased - or been sold - too much trailer. About ten feet too much. He had bought a 36-foot trailer that weighed 9000 pounds and resembled a blimp on wheels. He was deathly afraid of it.

His story was pathetic. The Bonhams had established a three-point credo - fishing, hunting and avoiding of snow. But they had spent the ten months since his retirement going from Iowa to Idaho. At this rate, he calculated he would be 100 years old before they could complete a trailer trip from coast to coast. The fact that Mrs. Bonham would still be in her 90'S only made Mr. Bonham more morose. They traveled only on Sunday mornings between five and ten o'clock, when the highways were clear of traffic. Once they stopped, it took weeks to bring themselves to start out again. Since it seemed unlikely Mr. Bonham would ever be able to drive coast to coast (or to any coast, from Idaho) with his present horsepower or courage, the only thing I could urge was that he turn in his 36-foot mansion for an 18-foot cottage. This he swore he would do - either that or saw his trailer in two and give half of it away.

This was the day of the big experiment. Merle was to prepare dinner while we were rolling along the highway; By the time we had stopped for the night and I had the drains hooked up, wheels blocked, and lights plugged in, it would be on the table. We would

thus have the entire evening to ourselves - and show fellow trailerites an innovation in travel technique.

Merle was enthusiastic about the plan. When we pulled up for gas outside Spokane, she transferred to the trailer eagerly and I watched with pride while she got out pots and pans. We agreed that three knocks on the front of the trailer would be the signal to stop.

I drove along for a half hour or so, picturing the meal we had planned - brown potatoes, string beans slathered with butter, a thick steak and apple pie. I worked up such an appetite just thinking about it that I decided to peek in on the cook and offer her a few words of encouragement. I pulled the rig up to a stop and trotted back to the trailer.

I was horrified. The place was a shambles. Bruised apples and potatoes were rolling all over the trailer. The beans were crushed on the floor under the sink. The pie tin was in the bathroom, the largest pot in the bedroom. Merle was flat on her stomach on the floor with a death grip on the rugs. Angry tears were streaming down her flour-covered face, the mixture making little blobs of dough.

I rushed in to help her up but she brushed me off wrathfully. “*You,*” she said. “*You and your grand ideas!*”

She sobbed out the pitiful story. We hadn’t gone ten feet before Merle was desperately trying to rescue the food from crashing to the floor. In her scramble to save the potatoes she knocked over the box of flour and, in attempting to save the rugs from becoming flour-drenched, had dropped the beans and stepped in them. Then she slipped to the floor and lost *all* the groceries.

She fell down every time I went around a curve and slammed against the wall whenever I put on the brakes. She had staggered to the front of the trailer and hammered on the wall, but the wind had carried the sound away from the car. It was then that she decided the only thing to do was to lie on the floor, clutch the rugs (which had rubber backs and were almost immovable) and cry.

We had a ham sandwich and coffee for dinner that night.

WE WERE on the main street of Las Cruces, N.M., and everything was proceeding normally, when Merle suddenly burst out with, “Let’s go to El Paso instead of Albuquerque!”

The turnoff was right there. The blare of horns from the lineup of traffic behind us urged a quick decision. We headed for El Paso.

We should have gone to Albuquerque.

In the hills above El Paso we became hopelessly lost. Then I spied a highway carrying heavy traffic - which we joined. In less than two minutes the front bumper of the car was nosed smack-dab up to the International Bridge leading to Mexico.

Here was potential disaster. I began to quake. There wasn’t room on the highway to turn around, and cars piled up behind us, shutting off our escape in the rear. The customs official was most polite. He first asked us if we had any baggage. Merle said, “Yes” - and I shook my head, “No.” The customs man’s right eyebrow raised slightly.

I squirmed uncomfortably and gave Merle my “pointed eye” look, which means that I am to do all the talking. I tried my best to explain to the official that we probably had baggage, but not in the sense that the word “baggage” is generally used.

The official seemed a shade unhappy with the explanation. One or two more questions brought equally confusing replies. Then he asked the question I feared most: “How long are you going to be in Mexico?”¹

I took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. “Five minutes,” I said.

His head snapped up. “Five minutes! You want to go to Mexico in a trailer *for five minutes?*”

I gave him a sickly smile.

Merle, in spite of my warning, re-entered the conversation. “You see, it’s all a mistake. We really don’t want to go to Mexico - not really.” Her voice was quaveringly elegant.

The official was beginning to believe we were either idiots or eccentric millionaires out on a lark. I decided to foster the latter notion, saying, “Ha-ha! You see, we just want to turn around. Ha-ha.”

“Why can’t you turn around in the United States - or *Texas?*” the customs man asked. His voice had acquired that silky quality I have always imagined an FBI man assumed just before pouncing on the leader of an international smuggling ring.

I was hard-put for an answer. After all, there *was* quite a bit of room in Texas. There was only one way out - I poured out the whole ludicrous story. That we were neophyte trailerites, that we were in a strange town, that we were on the bridge only by mistake. I promised to be out of Mexico not in five minutes but in *two* minutes. If it would help any, we would leave El Paso immediately.

It was a sincere, heart-rending plea and it brought results. We went into Mexico - took a four-block tour of that country - returned to the bridge, and again went through customs.

Our whole foreign hegira had taken less than three minutes. We were so unnerved by this time that we headed right back to Las Cruces, pondering the two records we must have set: (1) the shortest tour of Mexico in history and (2) the first trailer in the world to visit a foreign nation just to turn around.

IN CARLSBAD, N.M., we discovered one of the best-landscaped, most modern parks we had yet seen. It made us both look forward to visiting what Merle constantly referred to as Carlsbad *Taverns*. I corrected her after she had committed the error for the third time, but she was pretty irritable about it. “Caverns, Taverns - what’s the difference? It’s a hole in the ground!”

Her irritation probably stemmed from her experience in Phoenix, where she had pointed out several times to our trailerite neighbors the “Consternations” flying overhead.

Crossing Louisiana, we rocked our way into Biloxi, Miss., a place that *did* something to Merle. She had recently read an article on this Gulf-coast city and was steeped in its history. This, plus the ease with which the name rolls off the tongue, caused her

eventually to regard Biloxi as the center of the universe. Merle reckoned distances in “miles from -Biloxi.” She computed time and dates for months afterward by the simple statement, “Let’s see, now - we left Biloxi in December.”

Whenever she consulted a map she first located Biloxi, then traced her way to Lake Champlain or Seattle. It became a fixation. In Ohio I inquired the distance to Aurora, Ill. She reached for the map and promptly asked, “How far are we from Biloxi?” It was very disconcerting.

Merle had another peculiar quirk about map-reading. It was easy enough for her to visualize our traveling from the bottom of the map to the top, but utterly impossible for her to conceive of us traveling from the top of the map to the bottom. Unless the map was printed to conform to her idea of the direction we should be traveling, right turns always became left turns, and towns we had passed through were continually popping up as being miles ahead.

She tried desperately to overcome this idiosyncrasy by turning around in the car and reading the map while facing the rear, but this worked only occasionally - just often enough to keep me in a constant state of confusion. She said it always helped to hold the map upside down. But it’s difficult to place your confidence in an upside-down map-reader.

When we reached Miami, Merle wanted to park on the ocean front. But the rent for such a space, we learned, from January through April was \$110 per month - and we supply the house! I was greatly relieved when the camp manager told us no ocean-front spaces were available. We ended up at Lee’s, drawn by the euphonious slogan “No Fleas at Lee’s.”

Later we visited the largest trailer park in the world. We expected to see several hundred trailers, but we weren’t prepared for the colossal Bradenton Trailer Park, which accommodates more than a thousand. It was filled to capacity. The park is operated by the Kiwanis Club and the profits are devoted to charity. Plans for expansion are under way despite its present size.

There are scores of shuffleboard and horseshoe-pitching courts. Badminton and table tennis are played in a dozen different places. Every winter the canasta addicts and bridge wizards gather from the 48 states and tournaments run for months. There are thousands on thousands of square feet of dance floor and you can conjure up a hundred couples for a square dance just by scraping a bow across a fiddle.

One trailerite informed us there was a minimum of 3000 fishing poles in the park. Another swore there was enough fish line available to reach from Portland to Portland. The whole aspect was so alluring it would scare the average homeowner right out of his mortgage and into a trailer.

WE HEADED north across the Carolinas toward Washington, D.C. In a fever of excitement we swept down on the Capitol, the Washington Monument and the Pentagon. We pointed and exclaimed and oh’d and ah’d at everything. Here, on this very ground, trod Washington and Jackson and Jefferson and Wilson and Lincoln. I began reciting the Gettysburg Address in stentorian tones.

Arrived at the Washington Tourist Camp, with our trailerite neighbors on either side looking on, I backed The Monster into a narrow spot behind a tree. It required an intricate, daring set of maneuvers, which drew gasps of amazement and admiration from the onlookers.

Washington I was going to like. That was for certain.

We were amazed at the number of tents pitched within rifle-shot of the Capitol. More than an acre of ground is set aside for campers. Conventional motel cabins are available by the dozens. There are several large dormitories on the grounds, providing housing facilities for the bus loads of school children visiting their capital city. A grassy several acres with paved streets is reserved for trailers. Each space has its sewer system, electric and water connections. The whole enterprise is privately managed under the benevolent eye of the Government. The rent (including electricity) was \$6.12 per week.

It was inevitable that we should strike up a number of acquaintances along our street. Our right-hand neighbors were the acrobatic team of Hoon and Michael, and their wives. Loretta and Clifton Hoon had a young son aged six, so that five people were jammed into a decrepit, secondhand trailer and a used car of very ancient vintage.

Their play dates were often 700 miles apart. This meant closing in one city with a midnight show, packing up, driving all night and all the next day, to open in another state the following evening.

The fact that they carried all their equipment with them added tons of weight to an already overloaded trailer, and placed such a towing burden on their ancient car that they had to set up a complete operations-crew in order to negotiate hills. This was a sight to behold in action.

The two men took turns driving, which meant permanent positions in the front seat, along with Junior Hoon. The ladies, who were equipped with four-by-six blocks of wood with rope handles, rode in the back seat. At night all but the driver were permitted to sleep. In the daytime it was the duty of all occupants to remain wide awake and peer as far ahead as possible in order to spot hills. The first one sighting an incline of any dimension cried "Hill!" This was the cue for the driver to plunge the accelerator to the floor boards. Occasionally they would make the hill. More frequently not.

After the cry of "Hill" everyone was automatically under the command of the driver and assumed to be alert at his station. The girls would have one hand on the door - in the other they would hold the wood blocks by the rope handles. The driver would have his door opened slightly to facilitate a quick exit.

On the driver was placed the burden of judging whether the car could pull the trailer over the hill. If he felt the car losing way (which was usually the case) he would shout "All out!" All four doors then flew open. The girls, blocks in hands, ran to the back of the trailer and put their shoulder to the rear end. The two men leaped out and shoved on the rear bumper of the car, while Junior slid over behind the wheel.

There were only two other commands needed to keep the action smooth. As they reached the crest of a hill the welcome cry "All in" would sound. The most dreaded command was "Blocks!" With this call the two girls would race from the rear of the trailer and place their wheel blocks. The driver would yank on the emergency and Junior would step

on the brake pedal. The extra man acted as roving center and threw in his weight wherever it was needed most.

The girls were firm in the conviction that they had pushed their trailer over every hill in every state east of the Mississippi.

We became interested in the Hoons for another reason beside their trailer-towing technique: Loretta Hoon's educational system, devised for her six-year old son. Whenever the Hoons entered a new state they purchased a jigsaw puzzle of the state. The puzzle then had to be assembled by counties. That took care of Junior's geography.

On the back of each section were printed the vital statistics - names of cities, population, historical background, industries, etc. Loretta would read this information to Junior while he printed parts of it on a blackboard. This took care of reading, writing and history.

Civics almost took care of itself, since this was the kid's third visit to Washington, D.C. He had acquired a remarkable fund of information about the city and about such historic figures as Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson. On the road, Junior had to keep track of the mileage traveled, the cost of gas and the amount used. This was his arithmetic lesson, and a practical one. All in all it seemed to us the most painless educational process ever contrived.

WHEN WE got to New York we invited our trailerite friends the Days to join us in a boat trip around Manhattan Island. This trip can be irksome to a dyed-in-the-wool Californian who is positive that all the great wonders of the world are confined to the Golden Bear State.

The announcer assigned to our sight-seeing craft left no doubt in the minds of the outlanders aboard that the United States is bounded on the west by the Hudson River. Everything he pointed out was - without exception - the longest, tallest, widest, flattest, heaviest, lowest, onliest thing, device or concoction in the world. He dripped superlatives.

It was irritating, humiliating, *true*. It was a bitter pill.

I closed my ears and sulked all the way up the Harlem River. I sat in stony silence as we came down the Hudson, until the Days poked me in the ribs and pointed up to the George Washington Bridge.

Bridge! The word re-echoed in my brain. *Bridge* - That's what we had in California. Bigger bridges, longer bridges, more expensive bridges than they had in New York. Here was my chance. I listened to the slick-voiced barker.

"I direct your attention," he was intoning unctuously, "to the bridge directly overhead. It is the world-famed George Washington Bridge. This suspension bridge from New Jersey to New York is 3500 feet long."

"Give him rope," I muttered to the Days. "Let him hang himself. If he says this is the longest suspension bridge in the world, I'll grab the microphone myself."

"The total cost of the span," the voice went on, "was 60 millions of dollars."

“Peanut;” I said. “He’s coming to it now, then I’ll let him have it.”

The voice said, “Now, for the benefit of any Californians aboard, this is *not* the longest nor the most expensive suspension bridge in the world. That honor goes to the famous Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.”

I could scarcely believe my ears. I had been double-crossed.

WE STRUCK out from New York, luxuriated in the lush New England springtime, as we had promised ourselves nearly a year ago, and lumbered into Belfast, Maine, a picture-postcard town cradled in the arms of Penobscot Bay. Here was our recompense for more than 8000 miles of wrong turns, coyotes, difficult backings and truck routes.

In a trailer camp with a lush carpet of green grass, shaded by giant oaks, we signed the register for a two-weeks’ stay. This period quietly lengthened into five weeks and would have developed into five months had it not been for my earth-shaking encounter with the budget.

The quiet peace of New England presented a fine opportunity to catch up on my bookkeeping. I added up the long columns of figures - nearly a year’s supply of them. The budget was a shambles. We had spent much more than the \$250-per-month we had allowed for the trip. This was the end. We had crammed a two-year vacation into one year. There was only one thing to do - get back home as quickly as possible and go to work.

I didn’t want to upset Merle with the bad news and spoil our return trip, so it took me two days of gentle urging to get her to pack up and let me get The Monster rolling back toward home.

Withal, the trip was pleasant but fast.

In Elkhart, Ind., Merle had a dream - a beautiful dream - about the Lincoln Highway. Although we didn’t carry a dream book as regular equipment, she insisted the dream was significant, and we must immediately change course and return to the West on the Lincoln Highway.

From Chicago to Aurora the highway was a well-marked strip of rubble. Apparently not a lick of work had been done on it since Lincoln finished it. Merle’s dream highway had turned into a nightmare.

We crept across Illinois to the Mississippi River, where we discovered what must be the world’s narrowest bridge. In the middle of it we encountered a woman driver aiming at us from the opposite direction. She zigzagged her way to within 20 feet of the trailer, stopped the car, got out and thrust the key at me.

If there was any passing to be done, she informed me, *I* would have to park her car and tow the trailer past it. If these arrangements weren’t suitable, she implied, the next 24 hours were free and she would just as soon spend them in the middle of the Mississippi as anywhere else. She summed up her whole attitude with a snap of her fingers, accompanied by “I don’t give *that* for trailer-houses!”

I admired and envied her a little as I parked her car as close to the bridge rail as possible and squeezed The Monster past. The clearance would have torn tissue paper to shreds.

THE MONSTER behaved admirably all through Wyoming and Utah and Nevada. We had encountered so many irritating difficulties Merle couldn't quite understand our several days of good luck and got into the habit of inquiring each morning, "Well, what's on the pogrom for today?" She couldn't have made an apter error. It took a few days to get around to it, but it was a dandy when it arrived.

At every point of entry into our home state the state government has set up agricultural inspection stations. Our difficulties began when the inspector, a giant of a man with amazingly big feet, had concluded his examination of the car and was ready for the trailer. Merle was eyeing the cement floor of the inspection dock, which was covered with a thick coating of oil and grease. The inspector paused with one hand on the door as Merle tapped him on the shoulder.

"You'll have to take off your shoes," she said sweetly.

The inspector leaned toward her unbelievably. "What was that again, madam?"

Merle bristled a little at the "madam" and interposed her 105 pounds between the inspector and the door. "I said you'd have to take your shoes off- they're dirty and oily! I just had the rugs cleaned. They're yellow."

"Yellow?" The inspector paused a moment and shook his head slightly to clear away the prior conversation. It seemed to help. He gave Merle a tolerant smile and said, "But, madam, I can't inspect the trailer in my *socks*."

Merle pulled herself up to her full five foot two and said slowly and clearly: "You will either have to remove your shoes or roll up all the rugs in the trailer." Then, as an afterthought, "And you'll have to take off your shoes to do that!"

Every word bit him. The inspector heaved a resigned sigh, unlaced his shoes and began his inspection.

He got his first surprise when he discovered our fernery, crammed with wild Ohio violets. Merle had inserted tufts of cotton among the leaves to keep them from rubbing against one another while the trailer was under way. The hundreds of little tufts of cotton startled the inspector no end.

"You are transporting *cotton plants*?" he asked accusingly. It was obvious to the inspector that he just *might* have on his hands a female Luther Burbank. Merle *might* be crossing cotton with Ohio violets in order to produce something in Technicolor to sneak across the state line.

The inspector was becoming very wary as he asked to look in the refrigerator. I snatched open the door of the freezer as quickly as possible - proof, I thought, that we concealed nothing inside - and our four-quart glass water bottle came flying out and crashed on the inspector's big toe. He yelped with pain and leaped in the air. The container bounced once, then crashed to the floor and smashed into a hundred pieces.

When the inspector came down from his leap he landed on the jagged neck of the bottle, cutting an inch-long gash in the side of his foot. He yelped again. Water rushed over the floor and cascaded down the floor furnace. Merle hurtled through the door and shouted at him, “*What have you done?*”

That harried individual could stand it no longer. He fairly erupted with wounded toe and pride. “*What have I done? Good grief, madam! - Look what you’ve done!*” He pointed to the floor, his smashed metatarsal and his leaking foot.

Blood was turning the water to crimson. Merle began crying. It was bedlam. The wounded inspector fought his way out of the trailer like a rabid panther.

Merle blubbered, “Look out for the -“

It was too late. Whap! His head bounced off the door. He staggered momentarily, then reeled off to get first aid.

I reluctantly went into the office where the inspectors, a sullen little group, were contemplating their hazardous occupation. Silently the wounded inspector, now sockless as well as shoeless, and plastered with adhesive bandages, handed me my clearance slip.

Everybody seemed relieved at our departure.

THE MONSTER now acted like a workhorse headed for the barn after a hard day behind the plow. He fairly outdid himself with good behavior and in no time at all we were back in North Hollywood, our starting point. We disdained the old spot at the trailer park and whipped around to an inside berth.

We were no longer tenderfeet, we were veterans and could park the trailer where we liked. Relaxed at last, I could not help indulging in nostalgic thoughts of some of the interesting people we had met on our trailer trip. There was the Montana physician who hooked up to a trailer every other year to study and contemplate, while his partner took care of the patients. They split the income and the following year their positions were reversed. They’ll both live to be octogenarians.

There was the president emeritus of a small midwestern college, whom we met in Carlsbad, N.M. He and his wife had been traveling on a small pension for the past two years. They had rolled through nearly every state in the Union, searching out and buying likely spots to park the trailer. They owned ten lots in ten different localities. Each had something special to recommend it - a mountain view, a lake, trees, the ocean, or a stream abounding in fish. The most expensive lot cost \$78 and their taxes on all ten totaled less than \$17 per year. He *is* an octogenarian.

Then there was Shamus Monahan, a crinkly-eyed Irishman who simply got tired of the eternal scramble, bought a trailer and took to the road. When his larder was empty, he painted mailboxes and stenciled on names. When it was full, he just sat and dreamed. He’ll probably live forever.

There were dozens of others. Some on pensions who were going to spend the rest of their lives traveling. Some who were just taking a year off “to get away from it all.” It was the most varied and interesting group of people we’d ever met. We loved every minute of it.

And we had seen America. We had parked on the lonely Nevada desert and among the majestic, tall and defiant trees of Idaho's Payette National Forest. We had shivered in the bone-penetrating chill of a night on the Continental Divide in Montana, and a few weeks later burned in the heat of Arizona. We had reveled in the wonders of the Southwest's beautiful Painted Desert and crossed the muddy Colorado. We saw the bayous of Mississippi. We drove by the fields of tobacco, cotton, corn and long-leaf pine in the Carolinas; the farms and orchards and truck gardens of Pennsylvania; the fat cattle and fatter hogs of Iowa and Nebraska.

And, as we traveled, we had relived the past of our country. It took more than a week to sate our interest in the scene of the famous Siege of Vicksburg. We were carried away by the beautiful Virginia countryside, with its wealth of Civil War history. In New England we saw Concord, where Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau lie peacefully in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery; Lexington, where in 1775 was fired the "shot heard round the world." We turned the calendar back to the 17th century and fought Indians from Falmouth Foreside to Yarmouth, Maine. We saw America - 10,000 miles of it.

WHEN I told Merle the rig would have to be sold and I would have to go back to work, she hit the ceiling - not too difficult a task in a trailer. Hadn't I promised her a two-year vacation? What was I, an Arnold Benedict? (She always transposed the name.) She pointed out the delightful convenience of The Monster. Wasn't it the most wonderful thing in the world to have your house with you wherever you went? The trailer slowed us down just enough to give us a perfect view of the countryside while traveling. Weren't we 20 years ahead of the poor, unfortunate people who had to live in stationary houses? "But," I said, "there's the budget," and I showed her the figures.

With bowed head, Merle looked thoughtful for what seemed like a good five minutes, then she looked up. "I have it all figured out" she said. "*You'll write a book.*"

I was horrified. "Write a book?" I yelled. "I don't know how!"

"Anybody can write a book," Merle said, "and there's good money in it too. Look at the Bible and the dictionary - they've been selling those books for years. You simply sit down and write. That's all there is to it."

I was nonplused. I was not only to write a book - but a book that would compete with the Bible and the dictionary. The argument lasted far, far into the night.

So I started writing a book. I bought some paper, oiled my typewriter and started banging away.

But whenever my typewriter stopped, the echo still seemed to come back from the Spartan trailer next door. It was either an echo or my neighbor was writing a book also.

Once when the echo did stop, I sneaked to the window and peeked out. A thin face with a little mustache and a butch haircut was peeking out of the Spartan. I decided that nobody with a butch haircut like that could write a book.

His trailer door banged open. I stepped outside and gave him a tentative "Hi."

He returned the greeting.

“Twiss is my name.”

“Jones is mine.

We shook hands. “Writer?” I asked.

“Sorta.”

“Book?”

“Yeah. You writing one too?”

“Yeah - sorta.” I fidgeted a little, then asked, “You been at it long?”

“Years!”

My heart sank. So it took years to write a hook.

Finally I asked, “What’s the name of your hook?”

And he said, “From Here to Eternity.”

THREE DAYS later came the bombshell. Jim Jones sold his book. To a publisher! For money!

I, an unpublished author, couldn’t continue to live right next door to a man who had really *sold* a book. Somehow I felt that Jim had double-crossed me. Every chapter he mailed to the publisher brought a return letter praising his writing. Whenever the mail arrived, a little knot would gather around Jim’s trailer while he read the letters. The neighbors pointed Jim out to visitors with swollen pride. Of me they said only, “He’s writing, too.”

In spite of the fact that Jim bucked me up and assured me that somebody would publish my hook, I couldn’t go on. Especially after Merle joined the group listening to Jim’s letters, while I sat alone in the trailer typing and sulking.

We got *The Monster* ready for the road and started out again.

I got a butch haircut and I continued to write a hook. This is it.