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DRIVING ACROSS TEXAS AT THIRTY-FIVE MILES PER HOUR

by Jean Granberry Schnitz



Progress. That's what they call it. True, travel is easier and faster than it was when I was a child, but trips across Texas are not what they were during the 1930s and 1940s. Expressways and interstate highways now speed travelers to their destinations. The wonderful little towns, the cities full of amazing sights, the courthouses, many with matching small-scale jails—all are by-passed by modern transportation systems. Gone are stop lights and bumpy roads, but not hot, dusty afternoons and freezing mornings. We just don't notice the outside weather as much now that the windows are tightly closed!

Imagine having no radio or tape deck or CD player or television to bombard the vehicle with sound! Modern children cannot imagine dashing across Texas at thirty-five miles an hour—or less. How long would a mere six-hundred-mile trip take at that speed? It would require seventeen hours of driving, plus time for meals, fuel, and other stops. Seventeen hours strapped into a child safety seat would be pure torture! Despite the long hours, I wouldn't take anything for the experiences my family had during such trips. Boring? Not with my parents along!

The first long car trip I remember was in 1936 when I was five years old. My brother, Billy Granberry, was two. My family was moving from Spur, Texas, to Victoria, Texas, where my dad, Dewey L. Granberry, was taking a job as Manager of the Victoria Chamber of Commerce. My mother, Lena Belle Scudder Granberry, was a teacher of piano and an accomplished musician. I don't remember much about that particular trip except that we got to Victoria after dark on a very cold night. We checked into a bleak little hotel room. Both Billy and I had terrible earaches, probably as a result of the change in altitude. Dad went out, found some

“sweet oil” and heated it on the radiator in our room. After the oil was poured into our ears, we were able to sleep.

Also in 1936, my family made a trip by train from near Victoria to Dallas for the Texas Centennial celebration. Though I was only five years old, I clearly remember being in the audience of a stage production with bright lights, vivid colors, and beautiful music. I also remember seeing fireworks and being carried through the crowd on Dad’s shoulders. We boarded the train in the early evening and arrived in Dallas the next morning. I remember the swaying of the Pullman cars that made it easy to sleep all of the way to Dallas and back. I wanted to run up and down the aisles but Daddy put a stop to that! That was one of the few trips we made by train instead of the family car.

Most of my family’s trips were for short distances, such as between Victoria (where we lived) and Sinton to visit my Grandmother Della Granberry and Uncle Elton, Aunt Mary Granberry, and three cousins. The most memorable part of those shorter trips for my brother and me was the way we spent the last hour on the road—peering into the distance to get a glimpse of Sinton’s water tower so we could be the first to shout and chant, “I see Sinton, I see Sinton. . . .”

Most of the long trips my family made were between Victoria (near the coast of the Gulf of Mexico) and Abilene or Slaton in West Texas, depending on where my grandparents were living at the time. Slaton is on the outskirts of Lubbock on the Staked Plains. Winter or summer, we left during the early morning hours, well before daylight. The reasons for early leaving were several: (1) to get as far as possible before the hot day made the car uncomfortable; (2) to get as far as possible before the children woke up; (3) to get through San Antonio before rush hour; and (4) to get to the destination before it got late, requiring us to wake up the entire household we were visiting. It was out of the question to stay overnight in a motel or hotel.

I remember a Hudson sedan of uncertain vintage, but Dad had bought it second-hand sometime during the 1930s. It was pretty

basic and probably pretty rickety, though, because the windows didn't always work and there were flimsy floorboards. There was no heater, air conditioner, or radio. We later acquired a brand new 1940 Chevrolet sedan, which was driven for many years because civilian passenger cars were not manufactured again until after World War II.

The reasons for traveling at thirty-five miles per hour were also numerous: (1) the speed limit during many of those years was thirty-five; (2) our car was unable to go faster than that anyhow; and, most important, (3) Mama got a headache and white knuckles if Dad drove faster. Unfortunately, Mama always got a headache anyway, and the first evening after we arrived somewhere, she had what she called a "sick headache" and lay prone on a bed, white as a sheet, until she recovered.

Necessary travel items included pillows and quilts, a large thermos of coffee for Dad, and a large jar of drinking water for the rest of us—and for the radiator. Mama always packed a picnic lunch for the first meal we ate, usually at mid-morning at a roadside park. We also carried a few snacks of fruit or nuts or cookies. In summer, we rode with the windows wide open. In winter, we closed the windows as tightly as we could, wore coats, mittens and caps, and wrapped up with all the cover we could find.

We always left home in the early morning, except for the one time that Daddy looked at the clock and mistook midnight for 4:00 A.M. By the time he discovered his mistake, the car was loaded and we were ready to go—so go we did! Once we got into the car, Billy and I were usually too excited to go back to sleep right away, even though our parents went to great trouble to get everything ready to leave before they woke us up and carried us to the car. How could we sleep? There were too many interesting animals to see. Skunks were numerous, as were coyotes, armadillos, raccoons, and possums. Only rarely did we see another motor vehicle.

By far the most numerous animals were rabbits—thousands and thousands of rabbits—all along the highways in the middle of the night. They seemed most numerous on the nights when we left

the plains coming back toward the coast. There was no way the car could keep from hitting rabbits, and we would shudder and groan when hapless ones went under the wheels of the car. The frequent thumping sound of rabbits being hit continued until daylight. The only way to miss them would have been to stop. They were far too numerous to miss. As far as the eye could see there were rabbits!

Sometimes the trips were related to Christmas, vacations, or other holidays, but other times there were family emergencies such as funerals and illnesses that caused us to travel to Abilene or Slaton. However long we slept, Billy and I always woke up when we got to San Antonio because of the dozens of times the car had to stop for lights and stop signs. It took at least a couple of hours to get through San Antonio during the 1930s and 1940s. (Imagine how long it would take now without expressways!)

We usually started singing about the time we got past San Antonio. The only time Dad ever sang was in the car. His rendition of "The Old Gray Mare" (she ain't what she used to be!) was memorable. We sang many songs of World War I and popular songs, as well as some parodies that were popular at the time. Among our favorite songs was "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain When She Comes." We all sang lustily and enjoyed making up funny verses about what "she" would be doing when she came. I clearly remember the day when we had been singing that song for a hundred miles. We came upon an old lady riding down the side of the road on a mule. Billy shouted, "There she is!" We laughed about it for the next hundred miles, and we are still laughing.

Another favorite was a parody of "Clementine," which went on endlessly saying,

I found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut
just now.

I just now found a peanut, found a peanut just
now.

Then we sang how we cracked it open, but it was rotten. Then we ate it anyhow, got sick, went to the doctor, died anyway. When



Billy, Jean, and Rascal at home in Victoria, 1941

we went to heaven, we found a peanut and it all started over again. That song was good for nearly a hundred miles, all by itself! (I wrote about the songs we sang during those years in a previous paper.)

Depending on whether our destination was Abilene or Slaton/Lubbock, we went through Fredericksburg or Junction. There was

a particular roadside park on Highway 87 between Comfort and Fredericksburg that was a favorite place for a roadside meal. We could wash our hands in a little spring-fed creek. Our favorite town along the way was Fredericksburg (though our route sometimes went through Junction instead). We always looked forward to seeing the quaint main street and the interesting houses which lined the highway. After Fredericksburg, there were miles and miles of open road, which translated into hours and hours of travel.

At that point, Dad would launch into the most interesting stories I have ever heard. He would keep us entranced for hours with tales of a little boy named Juan and his younger sister, Juanita. Juan and Juanita sometimes got kidnapped by Indians or bandits and had all sorts of fascinating adventures as they traveled with their captors. They always managed to escape, and had further adventures evading their captors while dealing with the elements, making their own tools, and finding food. My most vivid memory of those stories was about the time Juanita found a river. She went down by the water to get a drink from her cupped hands, but she saw the reflection of a mountain lion on a limb right over her head. Juan managed to rescue her by hitting the lion with a big rock or a stick.

Juan and Juanita always got home or got found by their parents about fifteen minutes before we reached our destination. What made the stories so interesting was that the scenery and towns we were traveling through were involved in the stories. Dad would say, "They camped over there by *that* hill." Juan and Juanita got water and fished from whatever stream we were passing. They were with us all the way! They might have looked for help at ranch houses or towns we passed. It seemed very real!

We didn't realize it at the time, but we were also getting a liberal dose of Texas history. Dad was a pretty good historian, having taught history at San Marcos Academy and in the schools of Spur, Texas, between 1925 and 1930. As we passed through the various towns along the way, we also were treated to stories about things that had really happened there, and explanations of why towns, rivers, or counties were named. Historical events were woven into

the stories, which went on for hours with me leaning over one of Dad's shoulders and Billy leaning over the other shoulder. (Seat belts? What were they?)

Sometimes we played games. Many were word games, but others involved counting cows or windmills or other such items on the side of the road. We usually carried playing cards, and if the wind from the open windows was not too bad, we played various card games like "Fish" and "Old Maid." We played a number game we called "Buzz." I got tired of that when I decided my little brother was a mathematics wizard. Actually, in this game a number (such as three) was designated. As we counted and came to any number with a three in it (or a multiple of three) instead of saying the number, we said "Buzz." I found out years later that Mama was squeezing his hand when it was time to say, "Buzz"—and he never missed. We also had books to read, but that was not a preferred activity. We'd rather look at the scenery as we went along.

Gas stations were gas stations back then. Engine oil was available and a flat could be repaired. Most stations had a restroom to be used by everybody, but some actually had a separate one for the ladies. Most had a water fountain, and sometimes they sold peanuts, sodas, and/or candy bars (though we rarely bought anything). Stations were not convenience stores as we have come to expect nowadays. Gasoline purchases were cash purchases most of the time.

We always had a picnic for at least one meal, but since we were on the road for so many hours, we always needed to stop for at least one other meal. If Mama had not packed food for another meal, we stopped at a restaurant or small café in some little town along the way. I was grown before I found out that restaurants served anything other than grilled cheese sandwiches or hamburgers. The **only** time we ever ate in restaurants was during trips.

I'll never forget one cold winter morning when we were driving south from Slaton/Lubbock. The roads then were much rougher than they are now, and they were very steep at places like the Cap Rock where the Staked Plains begin and end. As we started down the Cap Rock, Dad said, "Where did that wheel

come from?” Mama screamed. Sure enough, the wheel we saw rolling down the highway had come off our car. Since it was a back wheel, Dad managed to get the car stopped without mishap. We watched the wheel roll down the road with Dad in hot pursuit. After what seemed like a long time later, back he came back rolling the errant wheel. Soon we were on our way again. That was the closest we ever came to having an accident (that I know about).

Another time, we left Slaton on a freezing morning in our old Hudson. The number of rabbits set a new world’s record. Though all of us were bundled with coats and blankets, we were cold anyway. I counted rabbits through a hole in the blanket barely big enough to see through. Actually, there were too many to count all of them, so I soon tired of that game. There were drafts of cold air coming in around the accelerator, clutch, and brake pedals big enough to cause Dad to have to stop occasionally and walk around outside to get his foot thawed.

I always had great confidence in the integrity of Texas bridges and culverts. Dad occasionally stopped and informed us that he needed to inspect whatever bridge we were near. He and my brother disappeared under the road. When he came back to the car, he always announced that the bridge was quite safe and that there were no problems there. After Daddy and Billy had inspected the bridge, Mama and I inspected it, too. Bridge inspections were necessary, considering how long it took to travel between towns and how rarely fuel stops were needed. There were few public restrooms along the way, and only rarely did another car pass during our bridge inspections.

Sometimes we picked up hitchhikers. We never considered this practice to be dangerous. The years during which we traveled were during the latter part of the Great Depression and during the early years of World War II when the people who were hitchhiking were just plain people who needed a ride somewhere. During the war, the riders were frequently soldiers who were going home or back to war. Our riders always told interesting stories.

Dad drove most of the time. Occasionally, he would decide to take a nap, so Mama drove. That's when our dash across Texas slowed down to below thirty-five miles an hour. Mama did not like to drive that fast. She never liked to drive that fast, EVER. She always drove so slowly that the gears almost needed to be shifted down. Dad got his nap, though, even if we didn't make much progress. Usually, Billy and I decided that was a good time to sleep.

Many roads in those days were paved, but they were narrow and did not have shoulders. There were many railroad crossings and underpasses. Even the main highways still had stop lights and stop signs, especially in the vicinity of towns. The only heavy traffic we ever saw was going through San Antonio. Apparently, the railroads carried goods now carried by truck. What few trucks we saw usually traveled at night. Most were considerably smaller than today's "eighteen wheeler."

Driving across Texas at thirty-five miles per hour is probably gone forever. If we tried it now, we would likely be rear-ended by a big truck! It is still possible, however, to enjoy traveling across Texas on the wonderful modern highways, with conveniences such as rest stops and good signs showing distances and mile markers—and a proliferation of places to eat and stay.

One key to enjoyment of the long, slow trip across Texas was in being aware of the unique beauty of each part of the country through which we traveled. Also, we knew that we could not speed up arrival at our destination; but we were able to savor the joy of being together—laughing, singing, talking. To me, this is the element that is missing in our modern travels. We while away the hours listening to radios or tapes instead of making our own kind of music or telling our own kind of stories. We talk on our cell phones as though we never left home. In our haste to reach the destination, we forget to enjoy the trip!