

Summer Vacation (Part Two)

Written by Mark Shaffer
Wednesday, 24 June 2009 12:18

MARK SHAFFER & family head Up North...



“I’M ON VACATIOOOOOON!”

- Billy Crystal, screaming as he’s dragged behind a steer in City Slickers

There are a few inevitable, incontrovertible truths about Summer Vacations; the saddest by far is that they will all eventually end. Another truth is that somehow this almost always happens suddenly and before we are prepared to return to the realities of whatever it is we’ve been avoiding in the meantime. Our all-too-brief respite from the world always seems to come to a screeching halt just as we begin to mull the idea of chucking it all and opening a little bar on the beach, buying that tackle shop and learning to tie flies, or – in my own recent reverie – fantasizing about just how we’d be able to survive and thrive in the surreal beauty of southeastern Vermont. Naturally, this would mean doing something involving some sort of niche farming or artisan work or harnessing the mysterious and baffling powers of the vast pneumatic tubes of the internets. In short, things of which I know nothing about. But just this minute the cruel reality of Vacation’s End is bittersweet as ours is officially over. And I wasn’t ready. I am never ready.

“Now, I owe it to myself to tell you, Mr. Griswold, that if you are thinking of taking the tribe cross-country, this is your automobile. The Wagon Queen Family Truckster. You think you hate it now, but wait till you drive it.”

- Ed the car salesman, from National Lampoon’s Vacation

It is a little known fact that Henry Ford invented the Summer Vacation. At the very least, Ford and his contemporaries made it possible for the evolution of the Summer Vacation as we have come to know it. The automobile made it feasible – even in the early days – for families to travel together over greater distances at a nearly tolerable level of misery to boldly forge an annual American tradition. Unfortunately, this tradition had less to do with fun than simply being cooped up in tight, hot quarters bumping along back roads for prolonged periods of time with your parents and siblings. Then in the middle of the last century radical innovations in the Summer Vacation began to occur. The first was the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which to date has created the largest highway system on the planet, almost 50,000 miles of expressway spider-webbing the Lower 48. The second was air conditioning. By the late 1950’s it was possible to travel in the comfort of dehumidified, refrigerated air in the family car and to bail right into an air-conditioned motor lodge at journey’s end. Of course this ensured that many Americans never needlessly set foot outside their rooms once they arrived at their destination.

My father was not easily swayed by such suspicious “innovations” as automobile air conditioning or color television. We sweltered as a family on summer trips well into the 1960’s.

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Color TV took a bit longer. In those days the Big Summer Trip was a two hour drive to Myrtle Beach and a couple of weeks in a rented cottage on the north end. By the end of that decade we the idea of the stationary vacation had grown stale. My folks, a college professor and a high school teacher (both transplanted Minnesotans) had the lion's share of the summer free and decided to put that time to maximum use. And so it was that the Summer Vacation evolved into the Summer Road Trip. For several years we did this in a 1968 Ford Country Squire station wagon (complete with fake wood paneling), the luggage strapped to the roof.

The first summer I seem to recall an awful lot of time on the roadside re-securing the giant tarpaulin that was in theory tied around the luggage as a protective weather resistant seal. Just as the Country Squire approached something like the sound barrier on the interstate, a flap of canvas would blow loose or one of the twelve dozen knots tied in a vain attempt to anchor it down would unravel. Pretty soon we were trailing about 30 feet of sail cloth snapping and popping like small artillery fire in our wake as we barreled down the highway utterly oblivious as cars and buses passed us honking and flashing lights with people hanging out of windows gesturing wildly and screaming epithets – particularly above the Mason-Dixon line. This oblivion was usually due to the confluence of two things. Since the Country Squire was what we used to call a “demonstrator,” the vehicle had come loaded with every modern automotive bell and whistle the Ford Motor Company was capable of conjuring at the time. Thusly, my Dad had finally acquiesced to air-conditioning so the windows (electric) were rolled up tight. Indeed, shortly after the car's purchase the Old Man became a devoted convert. The sound of a mere crack from a backseat window was instantly followed by “Roll that up. Are you trying to air condition the world?”



Secondly, even if the windows had been down, the chaos that issued from the back seat would have been distraction enough to miss an Apollo rocket had one blasted past. I feel sorry for the children of today strapped comfortably into the rear of a luxury SUV or minivan, plugged in to more technology than NASA used to put the first man on the moon. We didn't have Gameboys, iPods, laptops, rear seat DVD players with individual headphones, or PDA's. No. We had “count the farm animals on your side of the road” and when that got old (ten minutes was a marathon session) we were reduced to “torture your sibling.” This was always closely followed by “dodge the hands swatting wildly from the front seat” and perhaps the first truly institutional cliché born of such outings, “don't make me stop this car.” Of course, as he craned around to freeze us with a steely parental glare promising imminent and terrible consequences, my Dad would spot the billowing tarp and stop the car anyway.

The next summer the tarp was replaced with a proper rooftop luggage carrier and my sister and

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I seemed to get along a little bit better.



The 1970's brought more evolution to the Summer Vacation. My parents bought an RV – a big travel trailer – and for a few years the summers meant bigger, longer trips to New England, Canada and the Midwest where we visited relatives. But by mid decade the long dreamy summer journeys were over. I was in high school, my parents were splitting and all that remained of the Family Vacation as my sister and I had come to know it was a pile of snapshots in a bureau drawer.

Trip of a lifetime

In the early summer of 2001 I was in the process of packing up my Las Vegas apartment and preparing to move on, wherever “on” might be. After a decade and a half in television news, I was burned out, disillusioned, disgusted and thoroughly pissed off at the business, my former bosses and myself. What had begun as a successful, ground breaking experiment in combining the resources of a major newspaper and a cable news operation had ended suddenly, surprisingly and inappropriately to the astonishment of all involved. And trust me, there is no place on the face of the planet more depressing or unforgiving when you are down on your luck than Vegas. None.

That was the bad news. The good news was that I had the summer off and an invitation to join my Dad on a road trip.

My Dad is one of the truly great road trippers of our time. I am told this runs in the family, that wanderlust is a genetic trait exhibited in various degrees of affliction. My Grandfather had it, my Dad has it and I've got it bad. By the time I was leaving Las Vegas, Dad had made the summer road trip not only an annual event but an epic one. A couple of summers before we'd rendezvoused in British Columbia and spent a week exploring Vancouver Island, salmon fishing out of Tofino, wandering the streets of Victoria and the city of Vancouver before he drove on to board a ferry for the Inside Passage to Alaska, solo. I always suspected the time spent in the cities was on my account as he generally loathes the crush and cacophony of civilization. Set him down in a national park or wildlife refuge – anything to do with nature – and he's a happy camper. The Old Man loves, loves a national park.

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