

When the Boob Tube Goes on Vacation

Now parents sick of hearing 'Are we there yet?' can pop in a video. They don't know what they're missing.

By PAT DETMER

I SAW THE COMMERCIAL AGAIN the other day and was just as perplexed and saddened by it as I was the first time. It's a shot of a minivan inching down the freeway, surrounded by other cars. The parents inside are smiling and relaxed because the kids, hooked up like air-traffic controllers, are quiet except for occasional bursts of laughter as they stare up at the ceiling. They are watching videos. The mother smiles warmly at the father, the father smiles back and the family unit rolls along.

These people don't know what they're missing. Car trips loom large in my family's history. I think back on the vacations of my youth—the bickering, the singing, the geology lessons—and realize that my best anecdotes as an adult come from those childhood excursions.

Cars didn't have CD or cassette players in the '60s, when we did most of our traveling. Instead, my parents, two sisters and I listened to static-infused local radio stations. Dad would fiddle with the dial, the signal would be pretty strong for about 60 miles, then it would falter and the search would begin again. He'd usually pick up some monster station from the far South, and the first thing we'd hear would invariably be Johnny Cash singing "Ring of Fire."

During one of our last trips as a family, when I was in college, we finally had a vehicle with an eight-track tape player. I vividly remember my sister Barb falling asleep in the front seat between Dad and me at 2 in the morning with her knee firmly holding in a Stevie Wonder tape that played over and over all the way across Nebraska and into Wyoming. I was driving, and I thought everyone else was dead to the world. I can't hear a Stevie Wonder

song today without thinking of my sister Susie weakly bleating "Pull it out" from the back seat, where she was attempting to sleep next to my mom.

While my father was in charge of the radio, my mother acted as teacher. If a ride lasted for more than an hour, the station



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY BRAVERMAN

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wagon became a moving classroom. We learned to read maps. We learned about local history. We learned about weather systems and flash floods and what they could do to the streams and rivers. I'll admit it: we also learned how to ignore my mother, who had a hard time stopping once she was on a roll. No rude comments or eye rolling from the back seat could shut her up.

"Oh, my. Oh, look at that. Look at that old courthouse. If only it could talk."

"I bet it would say, 'Hey! Keep it down out there!'"

To my sisters and me, the back of the station wagon was our domain, to be carved into personal spaces to suit our mood. This was before seat belts, when kids would lie in the rear window to toast in the sun and look at the sky. We were free-range passengers, and we made beds in the foot wells and forts behind the folded tents and coolers at the very back of the back. When we tired of the bickering, one of us would crawl to the front to find refuge between our parents, in those days when front seats went all the way across.

As we grew older, the sniping ceased and years of helpless, stop-or-I'll-wet-my-pants laughter followed. There was no one in the world funnier than we were, we believed, and if something was funny once, well then it was funny a hundred times, and we giggled and snorted our way across America. As for our long-suffering parents, we lived by the adage that if we made them laugh hard enough, they wouldn't have the strength to hit us.

Susie had a doll, a brand called Baby Dear, and it was so lifelike it was spooky. She still took the thing with us on trips when we were in high school, and we would hold it up in the back seat so that people who were passing us on the freeway could see it. As the cars came alongside us, the drivers smiling and admiring our little family group, we'd squish Baby Dear's face into the glass. It took several hours for Mom and Dad to figure out why the people pulling past us had such horrified looks on their faces.

Though my sisters and I eventually married and went our separate ways, we remain close. I believe this is partly because we were soldered together by miles and miles of shared experience, by slices of summer vacation lived on the road. We rode over the sticky blacktops of Kansas and climbed through the Rockies, all the while laughing, singing and talking over each other. These mem-

ories are as fresh as yesterday, and still invoke bursts of raucous laughter at family gatherings.

What will the little ones in that car with the video hookup be thinking about when they're in their 50s? What tales will they tell at their family gatherings? Will they reminisce about that great cartoon they watched on the way to Grandma's house?

I doubt it.

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