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Traditions of Travel

Have you ever heard what could happen to you if you crossed a cattle guard in a car and failed to follow certain procedures? To some, it may be surprising how many traditions sprang from travel by automobile. Think of the games played, the songs sung, the stories told, and the landmarks anticipated by long-distance travelers. The number of such activities does not come as a shock when considering their cramped position and limited resources immediately at hand. Long-distance travelers have discovered and passed on a variety of means and traditions for passing the long hours on the road.

Games are often employed to occupy the mind. Alphabet games serve this function quite well. One version was described by Christina Messler, a Snow College student from Grantsville, Utah. She said that in each round, each person in the car would take turns making up a sentence with each word beginning with the letter of the round until they reached “Z” (Messler). For example, one might come up with the sentence, “Annie ate an apple after algebra.” Imagine how many miles one might travel while thinking of a sentence of all “X” or “Z” words. Another alphabet game, which my parents taught me and my siblings, was a race where the winner was the first to find all the letters of the alphabet in order on signs and other objects outside the car. Once a person found the letter in question, he or she would shout the letter name and its location. For instance, if a person was looking for “R” and found it on the Hurricane exit sign, he would yell, “R’ in “Hurricane!”” or “R’ on the exit sign!” Then, he would keep an eye open for “S” (Furse).

Other games, as described by Messler and others, include Slug Bug, and the license plate game. In the former; if a person notices a bug car, he will yell, “Slug bug! What color?” and punch –

hopefully gently – the person sitting next to him until he can guess the car's color. In the license plate game, if a person spots an out-of-state license plate, he slugs the person next to him and yells the name of the state. As Messler demonstrated, “Idaho! BAM!” (Messler).

Despite physical limitations experienced while traveling, people have been able to find ways to move through such games as “Jello”, also known as “Corners”. In this game, whenever the car drove around a corner, the passengers would lean with it, so that the inside person squished the outside person, and, according to Messler, yelled “Jello!” My friends and I, who considered ourselves nerds, called the same game “Fun With Inertia.” Yes, we would yell, “Fun with inertia!” whenever we encountered a corner. All of these games have something in common that helps to pass the time: searching, whether it be for words, letters, colors, states, or corners, and they all engage the mind -- and sometimes the fist.

Songs can take the place of games where the road runs over featureless land with few signs, bug, or corners to look for. Some songs are meant specifically for travel, but travelers will sing any songs they enjoy. Messler recalls singing pop songs on junior-high bus trips. My best friend and I would often sing songs like “Smoke On the Water” or the tune to “Ride of the Valkyries” on high school music trips. Many of us have witnessed lone drivers, oblivious to observers, singing and bobbing their heads while waiting at stoplights.

For Messler, it is a family tradition to sing “100 Bottles of Pop on the Wall,” one might say, a Utah version of “100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall.” In my conservative family, I learned to sing “100 Bottles of Milk on the Wall.” The song begins,

100 bottles of pop on the wall,

100 bottles of pop.

Take one down, pass it around,

99 bottles of pop on the wall...

The song continues until no bottles are left. It has been a tradition in family to bet on the number of bottles we will have reached by the time we arrive at our destination or pass a certain point on the road.

Other songs include those learned in early years, such as “The Wheels on the Bus Go Round”, sung by many elementary students going on a field trip. Holiday songs often ring out in the car when people travel to visit family for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Singing is an entertaining way to avoid the depths of boredom where one may find himself counting mile posts.

Stories often stem from traditions and features of the road. Cattle guards are the subject of many such stories. Messler heard that if, when crossing a cattle guard, the driver doesn't honk, the goblins that lurk under the cattle guard will come up and seize the car, and leave it in ruins (Messler). I have heard a number of stories about cattle guards. For instance, if I don't lift my feet when the car passes over a cattle guard, depending on whose company I am in, I will either be forced into marrying a cow, or into telling my darkest secrets. I found it amusing, when, on a return trip from girls' camp, one girl purposely kept her feet down so she could tell us about all her crushes.

One tradition that can be explained by a story is the Chester Challenge, which was described to me by Christina Messler and Vanessa Young, another Snow student from the Toole area. On the highway between Ephraim and Nephi is a town called Chester which is so small that some boast that they can hold their breath while traveling from one end to the other (Messler, Young).

Stories are often connected to landmarks, such as Lover's Leap, from where, according to my mother, an Indian princess threw herself because she thought her lover was dead. When he, who was *not* dead, found her, he raised a mound over her, and continued to pile it higher for years until it became a mountain in her shape (Furse). Other landmarks may be significant in different ways. For instance, my family regards many of them as distance markers. When we see the lighthouse in Cedar City's Wal-

Mart parking lot, we know we are within an hour of home. When we pass the Beaver welcome sign, we know we are about halfway between home and Ephraim. When we see Mt. Nebo rear its head above the valley floor, we know we are not far from Nephi. To Messler and Young, the huge smokestack seen from the highway going north of Ephraim is a familiar landmark (Messler, Young). Messler thought of it as the Cigarette when she was younger, and now her family jokingly regards it as Sauron's tower in Mordor (Messler). Again, we see a connection to a story.

Over the years, long-distance automobile travelers have discovered ways to pass the time and make the miles seem to fly by faster. They play games to keep their minds busy; they sing and tell stories for entertainment; they connect stories to landmarks and divide the time between them. Now, next time you cross a cattle guard, be sure to lift your feet so you don't end up exchanging rings with a cow, and don't forget to honk, or you'll be paying for a new paint job at best.

Works Cited

Furse, Todd and Nani. Personal interview. 6 Mar. 2009.

Messler, Christina. Personal interview. 5 Mar. 2009.

Messler, Christina and Young, Vanessa. Personal interview. 21 Feb. 2009.