

A Retirement Odyssey, 2005

(Written for Vincent Falcone's "Philly News" and later appended to my website.)

Four years ago I decided to sell my summer house at the seashore near Cape May, New Jersey, because I felt it restricted my vacation options, and at this point in my life I wanted to do more traveling. The following year I spent six weeks driving throughout Italy (I am a former Fulbright Scholar at the University of Florence and have been back several times since). This year I decided to extend my time on the road to eleven weeks in the western United States, visiting relatives I hadn't seen in twenty years and places I hadn't visited in more than thirty.

I am a retired political science professor and former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola; I will be seventy-three years old in July and I drive a white retro-chic PT Cruiser named Bonnie because she looks like a "gangsta" car and reminds me of my childhood playing in the rumble-seat of a similar-looking vehicle around 1940. I am writing this because of the numerous times I have been asked the following questions: Did you travel alone? Weren't you afraid (especially because of my age and the fact that I'm a woman, I suppose, although some people were too polite to say so)? How did you do it?

Yes, I traveled alone—if I'd waited for someone else to go with me when and where and for how long, I'd never have made it. No, I was not afraid—I'd done it before many times, although not for eleven weeks: in 1969 I traveled the entire country for seven weeks with just a Yorkie to keep me company. This time I went without a dog because my little Maltese, Didi, had just died in September, and I couldn't bear to get another dog so soon.

How I did it is simple: I took two years to plan every phase of the trip, including possible delays and/or accidents, then stuck rigidly to the itinerary with very few substitutions, caused only by the interventions of others rather than myself. I left on March 14th and returned on May 29th, to the day, as planned. No accidents in between (Thank God!) and very few mishaps along the way (I'll describe these later). Friends and family members all had copies of my itinerary complete with telephone numbers of the hotels where I would be staying as well as my cell phone number for emergency purposes. (Turns out the cell phone was unusable around mountains or in the desert, so that little precaution was of limited value.) I carried very little cash with me and relied solely on credit cards and ATMs to provide what I needed. I cooked most of my own meals or used pre-roasted entrees bought from supermarkets along the way. And I was not at all shy about asking hotels to lend me their microwave ovens or to permit me to use those in their breakfast rooms to heat up what I needed. I carried my own lunches and relied as little as possible on restaurants. I bought yogurt, cheese, fresh fruit, salad greens or prepared salads and microwavable soups, brought crackers and ginger snaps with me, filled my cooler whenever convenient and added dried trail mix to supplement my diet. For picture-taking, I brought along both a 35 mm film camera and a digital camera (4 megapixels) to compare the quality of the pictures as well as the color. These I am processing on my computer from CDs. (To save the cost of printing from the film rolls, I simply had them developed and transferred to CDs as well.) I also brought several audio books to keep me awake on long stretches of

highway. I finished nine in all, including Jon Stewart's "America: the Book" and "Benjamin Franklin" by Walter Isaacson.

My aim was to make this trip as inexpensive as possible, without actually "going slumming" so to speak, so as to allow myself the luxury of buying souvenirs for friends and family along the way. Part of the two year preparation time was due to the length of time required to acquire time-share trades from RCI in the various places I wanted to stay for at least a week, and to secure a reservation on a cruise boat to Alaska. I used no travel agencies to book my tickets except for the cruise to Alaska; there I used "Cheap Tickets" as recommended by RCI to get the appropriate discount. I also signed up with Choice Hotels' Member Privileges to obtain free room reservations on my next trip. All my reservations were made directly by telephone and/or the internet for the best price. I also used my AARP and AAA memberships to obtain those discounts as well and brought AAA maps and guide books with me to help me decide what to see and where to go. I won't know until all my credit card reports are in just exactly how much this trip has cost me, especially with the high cost of gasoline, but if a discount was available anywhere, I took it. (I even listened to some sales pitches for time-share purchases to obtain a few vouchers for meals and special events.) I left my house in the care of people I trusted with the keys and security passwords, and I was not disappointed.

My car checked out before and after the 9,000 mile trip, with flying colors. By removing the back seats of the PT Cruiser I was able to fit more than six suitcases (including one with winter clothes for Alaska and one with Louisiana souvenirs for the relatives I was to visit, which I later filled up with souvenirs for my return) plus food chest, picnic basket and storage boxes to carry laundry supplies, dried food, etc. I think my little car compared well to the two minivans I owned before it as far as storage room and reliability are concerned. I changed the oil and filters only once throughout the trip, and it performed extraordinarily well in the snow and hail storms I drove through on the way to the Grand Canyon, Lake Tahoe and in Yellowstone. All-in-all, I think I did as well as I'd expected and perhaps better than I'd hoped. Eleven weeks is a long time to plan for.

As for the itinerary, judge for yourself if the trip was worth it: I visited friends in Houston on the first day out, spent three nights in San Antonio to see the Alamo and several other missions and ride a river boat through the city, before going to visit my cousin Tom's son and family (with new baby) near Phoenix. I spent two nights in Sedona, Arizona viewing the spectacular scenery there before heading out to the Grand Canyon, then spent a week in Las Vegas on a time-share trade right on "the strip". Needless to say I did not gamble but I did spend a bundle on Cirque de Soleil's "O" at the Bellagio and took pictures of as many casinos as I could visit.

I then went to San Diego for a week (my second time-share trade) in the heart of the Gaslight District (something like our French Quarter) and visited with my cousin Pat and her husband Leo whom I had not seen in over 20 years. We went to the Zoo and the Wild Animal Center at Escondido where I came face to face with an adolescent male lion, separated by only a glass window less than an inch thick. We also toured some missions and climbed to the lighthouse overlooking the bay at Point Loma for the spectacular view.

I visited with a friend of 40 years, Howard Bunce, whom I hadn't seen in at least 15, and together we went to see the harbor seals, Balboa Park, "Little Italy" and the campus of the University of San Diego where I was interviewed by a roaming TV reporter about the death of Pope John Paul II. The weather, needless to say, was gorgeous throughout my stay.

Next, I behaved like a typical tourist and visited Yosemite National Park (my "Golden Age Pass" purchased at the Grand Canyon, got me in for free). It was there that I had my first "mishap", so to speak. After viewing spectacular Yosemite Falls I decided to climb a mountain trail for eight tenths of a mile, that looked to be 45 degrees in spots, to see the beautiful Vernal Falls as well. On the way up I sprained the tendons in my right knee. A fellow hiker gave me his walking stick and I completed the trek in about an hour. The pain stayed with me for about three weeks because I did not wish to stop to see a doctor and the aspirin I was taking appeared to be working quite well. My next stop was Lake Tahoe where I took the gondola up the mountain just after a snowfall. Once again, the view was spectacular (and my winter coat came in handy).

The road down from Lake Tahoe to the California coast was along one of the most beautiful roads I have ever driven. Route 299 through Six Rivers National Forest and the Trinity River Valley was surprisingly empty of traffic but incredibly diverse in view—from mountain to desert to well-irrigated farmland. At one point I saw a coyote peeking out at me from the greenery along the side of the road and just wish I could have stopped more frequently to take pictures.

Next I went to Otter Rock, Oregon for my third time-share trade, to visit another cousin, Robert, and his wife Lily, in Florence whom I hadn't seen in over a decade. We traveled up and down the Oregon coast visiting an aquarium in Newport. It was in Newport that I also got the opportunity to see huge wild barking Sea Lions basking in the sun on a local wharf (I thought their barks were being artificially enhanced by microphone because you could hear them blocks away, but no, that was their natural argumentative tone when looking for a spot to lie down after fishing in the local waters). I also saw a herd of elk feeding and resting in a meadow but at first I didn't recognize them for what they were. Awfully big deer, I thought. My cousin set me straight. Elk and brown bears are frequent visitors, he said, even to his bird feeders.

My next stop was in a suburb of Seattle to visit my 93 year old aunt Delphine, now living in a nursing home with the beginnings of dementia. She remembered coming to New Orleans to visit me in the eighties, but forgot why. "That was a great party, Maria", she said about her encounter with Mardi Gras, but she was otherwise lucid and in good health. I met her grandchild and family including several of her great-grandchildren while there, and was delighted I could see her once again.

I then spent six nights in Vancouver where my second mishap occurred. This was the only hotel not part of a national franchise, but recommended to me by a friend who had not visited in four years and was not aware that it had changed hands in the interim. On the first night I awoke at 2 AM covered in bedbugs, some as large as 3 centimeters. I still itch

at the memory! (This was not a “cheap” hotel, by the way, but one on the main street of the city within walking distance of Stanley Park.) I immediately left for another Choice Hotel on the north shore of Lion’s Gate Bridge, and was delighted to be able to enjoy once again the delights of that beautiful city: the Capilano suspension bridge (scary!) and Grouse Mountain in addition to Stanley Park. A local photographer showed me a nesting swan on the edge of the lake, and told me about the great blue heron rookery on the fringe of the park. I also saw some bears and wolves on Grouse Mountain. Unfortunately, they were behind enclosures rather than free.

My fourth and last timeshare trade was at Nanoose Bay on Vancouver Island. This place was stunningly beautiful, especially at sunset where one could watch the tide roll out and walk on the boulders in mid-bay. Eagles and other sea birds were a common sight. During that week I drove to the Pacific side of the island through the Canadian National Forest toward Tofino. Not only did I see some interesting totem poles and other Indian artifacts but two brown bears on the side of the road. One crossed just a few feet in front of me, the other I almost drove past because it was bent over looking like a beer barrel until it moved. That was startling to say the least. I also stopped at Burchart Gardens north of Victoria with its stunning flower displays and took a boat tour from Victoria harbor to see a herd of resident orcas. One rather defiantly dove right under the boat to get a good look at us, I suppose. I also saw a cormorant literally out-run our catamaran doing 20 knots skimming along until it crossed in front of us and disappeared. I saw this feat performed twice on this trip, the second in Alaska. Amazing!

My next adventure was the cruise to Alaska aboard the MS Ryndam. My cabin was small but had a picture window and sufficient closets to hold my luggage, barely. The food was excellent, the entertainment engaging, the lectures on the wildlife and Indian cultures of Alaska by the naturalists and rangers were splendid and the side tours worth the trip. I took another boat tour to see hump-back (baleen) whales this time, and was delighted when one of them came close enough to demonstrate its spraying abilities with its huge blow-hole. We stopped at Juneau, Skagway, Ketchikan and “Liarsville” (met five young people from Metairie, Gretna and Mandeville) for the best salmon roast on the trip (the young chef had studied in New Orleans and San Francisco, of course), and toured Glacier Bay to watch one of the largest glaciers in the bay “calving” little icebergs into the water. Its name, appropriately enough was Margery (after a French explorer, not a woman, however).

I got to Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, just as the news about the murder of three people and the disappearance of two children from the same house broke the news. I never heard the outcome of that sad story and wonder about it today. The next day I was in West Yellowstone after driving down another exceedingly beautiful near-empty road (Route 191). I signed up for a bus tour of the southern loop of the Park which took us through the geyser fields including “Old Faithful” (twice!) and herds of bison and elk with actual calves on the sides and crossing in the middle of the road. It was obvious they had the right-of-way at all times. I also saw swans and pelicans and mule deer, but no grizzlies or wolves. The guide said they were on the northern loop which was partially closed this time of year.

My next stop was the Grand Tetons, a magnificent drive-through experience with melting snows atop those spectacular mountains. The drive across the Snake River onto Route 287 to Rawlins, Wyoming was the third of my unexpectedly beautiful experiences, complete with small herds of “prong horn deer” (antelopes), but one which almost turned into my third mishap on this trip. About two-thirds of the way there I noticed my gas gauge getting rather low. I drove thirty miles to Jeffrey City which turned out to be a crossroads of shacks with no gas station. I tried to flag down a tanker truck, then a large 18 wheeler, but no luck. (My cell phone was useless in the desert. I dialed 911 and waited ten minutes while it searched unsuccessfully for an emergency responder.) Finally a couple in a pick-up stopped and told me there was a gas station just ten miles ahead. I made it on the fumes alone.

My next (funny) mishap occurred when I tried to take the toll road around Denver without realizing that it had a completely mechanized system for taking tolls. When I saw a sign saying “Exact Change Only” I exited and discovered that I had only forty-five cents and a Canadian nickel with which to pay the fifty-cent toll. A sign pointed to a form to be filled out with a warning that if I did not send the correct amount of money to the toll road authority I would be heavily fined. My picture was being taken and they would use my license tag to find me. I threw in the Canadian nickel anyway but it did not register. So at my next stop in Colorado Springs I wrote out a check for “Only five cents” and mailed it in with a thirty-seven cent stamp! Three weeks later my bank statement included a photocopy of that check duly submitted and cancelled by that very efficient toll road authority. (Are you listening, Louisiana?)

I got to Santa Fe the next day and saw some of the loveliest adobe buildings anywhere (I had been to Taos and Pueblo on an earlier trip), plus a surprising French touch in the romanesque architecture of the Cathedral of St. Francis and the Loreto Mission, owing to the influence to the first Bishop of the city who was from France (sort of like New Orleans, I suppose, except the Spanish influence is still dominant there). I noticed a recent statue of Saint Kateri Tekawitha in front of the cathedral, depicted as an Indian in Mexican dress, but I had always heard she was a Mohawk from the Niagara valley and should have been clothed in deerskin. Am I wrong?

Finally, I visited Carlsbad Cavern and walked all around that enormous great room some seven hundred feet below the surface (my knee was fine by that time), and in the evening came back to watch 750 thousand Mexican split-tail bats emerge from another portion of the cave to hunt for moths and other insects. Once again the rangers gave excellent talks about both phenomena to anyone who was interested. The children in the audiences were all enthralled.

I returned to Metairie tired but a bit pleased with myself for never deviating from my planned itinerary and getting back on the day I'd promised. Now all I have to do is figure out which pictures were taken where and which ones I want to keep and print to send out as mementoes to friends and relatives across the country. With almost 2000 to choose from, this alone will be quite a task, as will trying to decide which person gets which

souvenir/s among the many stuffed animals, tee shirts and wood carvings, etc., I picked up along the way. That may take until Christmas, if I'm lucky.

Right now, I am already planning my next getaway: Hawaii, 2006, but only for 3 weeks—unless I think of something else to add in the meantime.

[PS: Hurricane Katrina intervened before I could complete these tasks. I did send this and a few pictures to Vincent Falcone for his “Philly News” and he published a portion of it in his fall edition.]