

Bears in the Window: What a Memory

By Dennis Payton Knight

“Do not feed the bears” was posted on signs throughout our trip to Yellowstone Park. I would have been just shy of my second birthday, and there is no chance I was reading the signs for myself, yet I was. Maybe Mom read the first one to me when we entered the park, and I decoded the identical others with that single, clear line of instruction. I probably read them all out loud just to show off.

There are other things about our trip to Yellowstone that my older siblings Jerry and Maureen will politely clarify, if not outright challenge. But if I say it was in a black '36 Chevrolet sedan with a hump on the back where the trunk should go, then I will politely tell them this is my essay. Go make up your own memories.

I do not have much recollection of the hours it took us to travel from Laramie to the opposite corner of Wyoming, except for coming across on the way a desolate landmark called Independence Rock. That place meant nothing to me as bears were not involved and I was not at a stage where I was looking for much more independence than holding my own bottle.

I believe the year was 1945, and it was right before school started for Jerry and Maureen. Gas rationing had finally ended that August 15th, giving our folks the confidence of finding enough fuel along the way to make such a trip.

When we drove into Yellowstone Park, I had an advantage on the others because I could stand and watch the fascinating sights of buffalo and bears as they diminished in the back window. What a memory. You might ask if Dad didn't see the same things in the rear view mirror. Not so: he saw the back of my head. And to that other question you are about to ask, 1936 Chevys came along a good thirty years before car seats and seat belts.

If our folks were frustrated by the construction delays of several hours between the park entrance and the Old Faithful Inn, I didn't know it. I only remember, because we arrived after the office closed and missed our reservation, all five of us had to sleep in the car that first night.

Who knows? It might have been raining, and wolves and wildcats and skunks may have been on the prowl. But one of the beauties of early childhood memories is you get to recall the good stuff. And a night of slumber in the safe shelter of a car parked in peaceful nature was good stuff indeed. It was harmony enhanced, not disturbed, by the bugling of elk, the distant competition of grizzlies, the nocturnal foraging of brown bears putting on fat for the winter, the sulfuric aroma of bubbling mud pots, and only yards away, the hourly roar of the faithful Old Faithful. What a memory.