

FUN IN BIG RED

By Fred Hobbs

Our kids were just the right ages at the time. Out of diapers, but not yet teenage, inquisitive and reasonably flexible. Nicely suited for a family trip on the highways and byways of late 1960s America, surveying and observing the passing scenes.

We traveled in our Volkswagen bus, which we called "Big Red", in honor of the color picked at the dealership after consultation with the younger set. The vehicle was perfect for vacation travel. More like a box than a bus, Big Red had lots of large windows, front, back and sideways. Driver and passengers alike could enjoy the view and more effectively play the travel games such as counting license plates on cars that more often than not passed us on the road. (Big Red delivered great gas mileage, but lacked the power of its sleeker, speedier vehicular brethren.)

Our oldest son, Chip, was the champion license plate spotter, largely because he preferred to stretch out on the shelf above the engine located at the rear of the vehicle, a feature at the time of all VWs, buses or Beetles. His position allowed him to see license plates in cars both coming and going.

A variation of the license plate game was farm animal spotting and counting.

In Big Red's era, before the completion of the Interstate Highway System, travelers still were routed on many miles of U.S., state and even county roads.

Cows, horses, maybe even some sheep, could be seen grazing in roadside country pastures. The older kids sometimes teased the youngest by pointing to cows and saying, "See the horsies, Freddie." Being an amiable sort, he would simply smile and nod. We were never sure the four-year old city boy really knew the difference, but we did admonish the teasers to cut it out.

As dusk approached and it was almost time to stop for the night, we often invoked a game of "Aunt Sally." My wife and I would inform the kids that Aunt Sally went to the store to buy a loaf of bread. Then each child in turn would add an item to Aunt Sally's grocery cart, the player next in line required to list the items in order. The youngsters were much better than the adults at remembering and reciting the sequence. By the third or fourth item, I had trouble recounting them all, much less in order. Of course, I was driving and had the excuse that I had to concentrate on the road ahead.

On one particularly memorable trip, Big Red took us to the Pacific coast. We drove through Wyoming and Idaho to Portland, Oregon and from Portland to Southern California, much of the trip along the beautiful coast highway, with stops to see relatives and the sights such as Seal Rock in Oregon, San Francisco Bay and the city attractions. After each stop, the conversation in the bus centered on what the kids liked best at that point and answering, or attempting to answer their many questions.

Last stop before returning home was Disneyland. This was one section on the trip when the kids didn't seem interested in counting license plates or observing farm animals. The question at that point first was "When do we get there?" And as we got closer to the land of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, the inevitable "Are we there yet?" As the driver, I was obliged to give some kind of answer, but foolishly said, "Just about an hour. Be patient."

I was not anticipating the affects of entering the L .A. area and traveling the scary freeways at rush hour.

Exhausted by the day's travel, the kids had dozed off. Big Red plodded along in the long line of 15 miles per hour traffic. Finally, we reached the motel in Anaheim, my wife and I happily noting the fun the kids would have observing and surveying Disneyland accompanied by its musical mantra, "It's a Small World After All."