

Untitled Budget Contribution
by James N. Myers
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I went to Boy Scout camp only once. In fact, I joined the Boy Scouts at age twelve, when I had learned from a friend that the local troop was about to go to camp. It was a three day trip, as I remember, eating canned beans and hotdogs roasted on sticks, taking hikes in the woods, wondering where the Girl Scout camp might be, sleeping in heavy canvas tents without floors, and being happy to get back home on Sunday afternoon. That was my last connection with the Boy Scouts and my final experience of camping, until my family's move to Cheney, Washington.

It was 1970 when I flew west from Detroit to Portland Oregon and Spokane Washington for a couple of job interviews. It happened that I liked the boss at Eastern Washington State College in Cheney and he liked me, so the deal was struck. Well, the deal was almost struck, because I had to convince Pat, my wife, that we and our three young children should move to a place she had never heard of. Cheney was not much bigger than it was famous. It had a single traffic light which had caused quite a stir when it was installed a year or two before. It had few stop signs, but an "understanding" that uphill-downhill traffic had the right-of-way against traffic traveling across the hill. It had once been on the main road to Seattle, but had been bypassed by the freeway, and had the singular indignity of having been misplaced by twenty miles or so on a new map by Rand-McNally.

In any case, we agreed to move to Cheney, and since we were young and energetic and because it sounded like fun, we decided to camp our way across country. Our moving van was going to take several weeks to get our furniture to Cheney. Because our modest household would make for a small load, we would be loaded first, in the front of the van, and we would have to wait for two other small time moves to load and then to unload before our delivery. So, why not a camping vacation?

We set out to buy a tent, but stumbled upon a used tent-trailer. This was as small a trailer as you might sleep in, exactly the size of a single slice of plywood. In fact it had two slabs of plywood hinged at the sides of the trailer. You attached posts to hold up the beds, flipped them out, pushed up the tent support and ended up with the prettiest little yellow and green tent that you ever saw. We bought sleeping bags, a Coleman lantern, a Coleman stove, a wooden "camp-kitchen" with pots and pans and off we went, kids in tow aged 7, 5, and 3. We had a map and a book that listed campsites, and no idea of what might be ahead.

The camping went pretty well as we started westward. We had overlooked the need for an axe, so my son and I had to split a log one evening with a screwdriver and a hammer. I held the screwdriver, while he wielded the hammer. It was a bit frightening, but otherwise uneventful. Perhaps it was in Iowa that I spilled white gas down the front of my swimming trunks as I was filling the lantern. White gas is unsuitable as a wash for tender body parts, as I remember. I rushed to rinse off in the tent, with Molly shouting outside, "What's wrong with Daddy? What's wrong with Daddy?" I don't know how Pat explained to a frantic five-year-old girl that daddy was rinsing his privates in a large glass of cold water.

If you have ever driven it, you know that the drive across South Dakota, relieved only by a trip through the Badlands, a stop at Wall Drugstore, and a quick dip south into Custer State Park to

see the buffalo and the prairie dogs is a bit of a trek in the heat of summer. A place that has a drugstore as the prime destination over several hundred miles is the very definition of desolate. We had camped there, somewhere near Wall and, as we were heading into the north-eastern corner of Wyoming, there was a debate raging about whether we should go to Devil's Tower National Monument. I wanted to make the slight detour and to camp there, while Pat, realizing that Montana was a two-day drive and fearing that our moving truck was likely to arrive early, was insisting that we move along.

One thing that we could agree on was that we should stop at the Dairy Queen in Sundance Wyoming — so we did. As the children exited the car, young Beth, barefoot and perhaps a little crabby after her nap, took it upon herself to exact some vengeance for a bee sting that her brother had suffered a few weeks earlier in our back yard. She stomped on a bee, and she killed it, but not before it could take a little vengeance of its own by stinging the sole of her little fat baby foot. She, of course, let out a blood-curdling shriek and continued shrieking for a considerable length of time. Between the shrieking and the negotiations over what kind of ice cream (there couldn't have been more than three flavors) and what size cone — "I want a big one, too!" — the argument continued: Devil's Tower or Montana. So, as I got back behind the wheel, things were really heating up, and I put the car in reverse, and tromped on the accelerator about as hard as Beth had tromped on the bee.

I don't know whether I felt it first or heard it first, but there was a noticeable bump and a very loud bang. I had jackknifed the trailer. Looking out over my shoulder I could see a wheel rolling and rolling away across the parking lot. It slowed eventually, started rolling in a little circle like a top, then just wobbled, and finally stopped wobbling, as if it had died. I knew that the camping trailer was now missing a wheel. The children, as children will in such circumstances, let me know that something bad had happened. Pat simply covered her face with her hands. It was not my finest hour. "Eat your ice cream," I said, and stepped out of the car. Everyone at the Dairy Queen was watching.

When I got out of the car, the news was not all bad. Yes, the trailer had jackknifed. Yes, it had put a twelve-inch vertical gash into the left side of my brand new red Chevrolet station wagon, but the trailer still had both of its wheels. The rolling wheel had been dislodged from the tongue of the trailer. It was the spare. I walked over nonchalantly as if it happens all the time, picked up the wheel, and tossed it into the back of the car, got back into the driver's seat, and drove off.

We drove in silence for a while — even the children were quiet. Finally, Pat suggested, "Let's go to Devil's Tower. I want to see it too." So, at the Devil's Tower sign, I turned off and drove to the Park, paid the ranger for entry and a campsite and drove around until we found just the right site. After all that, it was still fairly early afternoon, with lots of time to have an early dinner and still see the Tower and get an early start the next morning.

Very carefully and slowly as a jet plane taxiing up to the gate, I backed the trailer into just the right campsite. I got out, uncoupled the trailer hitch, put down the four corner braces, leveling the trailer, and sat down at the picnic table. The kids were already checking out the campsite, spotting the bathrooms, and the water faucets. Pat said, "I'll move the car." "Thanks," I said. It was so quiet...

And then it wasn't quiet. As the car pulled away from the campsite, there was the unmistakable sound of metal tearing. I had forgotten to take off the safety chain, so Pat was pulling the trailer.

The legs were down, so the two back legs pulled the back panel away from the trailer and now there was a new door in back, more like a flap, actually.

We had some wire in the toolbox, so we managed to thread it through the holes where the rivets had been and tighten it up somewhat. We agreed that it had been a bad day, so far, but a good trip overall, shared a beer, made a fire, cooked dinner, and fed the children, who seemed to have forgotten the whole day. It was still early.

The idea that we should take the circular walk around Devil's Tower was mine. It looked not all that strenuous, with a clearly marked path. With the five of us mostly cooped up in the car all day, I thought that the after-dinner exercise would do us good. I might have brought a flashlight or even looked at the map, but it was early evening, not a cloud in the sky. What more could go wrong after a day like this? Exasperated, but a team player, Pat agreed, and off we went.

It was a nice walk, a little uphill at first, but then it leveled out, so around that marvelous tower we went, trees and shrubs, birds singing, insects humming. It was exactly what I thought the west would be like. We stopped to snap pictures on our new camera, a going-away gift from parents, just for the trip.

It got cooler as we walked, and three-year-old Beth became a little fatigued. So we put her up on my shoulders where she pretended to be steering by tugging on my ears, digging in a bit with her nails — “Beth!” — “Sorry, Daddy.” The sky darkened a little as it began to cloud over, but I knew that it didn't rain much in Wyoming, and it didn't. But the walk was longer than we had thought and it was impossible to tell just how far around we had come. Beth was unconcerned, continuing to pull on my ears, but Jimmy started running ahead to try to find the campground, and Pat had to keep on calling him back to keep him within sight. Molly just kept on walking quietly, but closer and closer to my leg. Finally, she started hanging onto my pocket, because my hand was busy holding on to Beth's feet, to keep her from falling.

It became more and more dark, and finally Molly, once more, as ever, observant: “Daddy, are there Bears?” “No, honey,” I responded instantly, “nothing out here that could hurt us. We're in a park. Let's just keep on walking and we will be back in the campground really, really soon.” That is the sort of thing you say to children, whether you know it to be true or not. I did remember that one of the Native American names for Devil's Tower had been “Grizzly Bear Butte” or something of that sort, but that was a long time ago and, surely all the grizzly bears had moved to Canada by now, or at least to North Dakota. Were there rattlesnakes, coyotes, cougars, or wild boars? I began to wonder, but kept those thoughts to myself. We didn't see anything the rest of that night more dangerous than an owl or a chipmunk.

We made it back safely, and following cursory ablutions and supervised brushing of teeth, Pat and the children climbed into the tent and into sleeping bags. I stayed out for a while for a final smoke and a small glass of bourbon. It was decompression time after a very difficult day. Then off to sleep one and all, resting up for the next adventure, and on to Cheney — wherever that may be.