chapter one

Selling the Family Vacation

When I was twelve years old, my family went on vacation to Yellowstone National Park. We borrowed a friend’s camper and the nine of us piled in. My parents sat in the cab with my younger brothers, and my three sisters and I traveled inside the camper that sat in the bed of the red truck. The camper was a nifty little house on wheels, with a table, cushioned benches that turned into beds, a little stove and fridge and tiny sink, and a large bed over the cab. For most of the drive, my sisters and I played cards. It kept us from fighting. We were so involved in our game that my father had to stop the truck, get out, and open the back door of the camper to tell us to look at the Tetons. We gave the scenery a quick glance and went back to our card game.

One of the reasons for going to Yellowstone was that my mother had some rich relatives who lived in a family compound of cabins. The women and children spent summers there, and the men joined them on weekends and for a week or two. The cabins (large houses, really) clustered around the beach of Hebgen Lake. I remember they had their own dock, and speedboats and rowboats were tied to the dock. My only other memory of the trip is walking on the wooden walkways around the Morning Glory pool at Yellowstone and Mother saying that it was her favorite sight. I don’t remember seeing any bears, nor do I recall seeing Old Faithful.

If one symbol remains of the trip, it is not Old Faithful or the bears, but the card game in the camper. Maybe it is our only common memory because it is the most-repeated anecdote about the trip. It neatly symbolizes the way we see our family in three groups: parents, the four girls (born between 1949 and 1954), and
the three boys (born between 1955 and 1963). We girls were baby boomers, children of the greatest generation, World War II veterans and their brides. Mom and Dad married in 1948 after knowing each other only a few months. Mother abandoned her college studies not long after marrying Dad, and as a farmer's daughter, she knew how to pinch pennies as a homemaker. Dad finished college and earned a business degree in New York City before joining his father at the small-town furniture store. The partnership did not last, and Dad went on to earn his doctorate in business administration from Harvard, five children in tow; a sixth was born in Cambridge. The Yellowstone vacation took place upon our return from the years of graduate school in the East, after Dad took a job in his hometown to be a professor at the local university, and after my youngest brother was born.

The family vacation had long been a popular practice by the time we took our trip to Yellowstone. Recovery from World War II was just underway when Americans resumed their habit of the summer vacation. In “America Takes a Trip,” Business Week predicted that “In this summer of 1947, more Americans than ever before will get trout lines tangled in trees, upset canoes, and recuperate from sunburn. They are jamming highways, airports and railway stations to travel farther in greater luxury, stay longer—and spend more money.” A large share of American travelers was made up of families on vacation, who did not let tight budgets or the prospect of traveling with their children stop them from gassing up the family car and setting out across the country. The American Automobile Association (AAA) noticed in 1950 that “there’s a greater trend this year toward family vacations; more parents are taking their children with them.” Indeed, the AAA declared that “typical American vacationers . . . will still climb into the family car to take a look at the continental United States.” In the years after war’s end, American families were on the road.

The roots of the family vacation ritual can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when Americans found ways to justify leisure in a culture with a strong work ethic by “working at play.” But it was not until after World War II that family vacationing became a widespread practice accessible to the middle class, financed by an increase in paid vacation benefits to American workers and facilitated by the federal government’s construction of new interstate highways. Automobile manufacturers, oil companies, and the hospitality industry tailored their products to American families on the road. Consumers became convinced that buying cars and toys, eating at fast food restaurants, or staying at roadside motels would make the vacation an enjoyable and memorable experience for the
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whole family. The family transformed the American roadside landscape as they hit the road.

Making Vacations Possible

More middle-class families could afford to take vacations because of the increasingly liberal vacation benefits awarded American workers in the late 1940s. A Department of Labor report in 1948 declared that “paid vacation clauses are now a standard feature of union agreements in most industries.” By the end of 1944, 85 percent of union agreements contained vacation provisions for workers. The inclusion of paid vacation benefits in labor agreements resulted in part from the acceptance of vacations as beneficial to the worker “not only because it makes possible leisure and relief from everyday cares and duties, but also because the right to a vacation with pay is a mark of social status and a recognition of the worth and dignity of the ordinary laboring man.” Unions argued that vacations were necessary “to combat fatigue and to maintain good health” and improve the standard of living for the workers. Furthermore, they were good for the employer because paid vacations had a “beneficial effect of relaxation and recreation upon labor morale [and] productive efficiency,” and they were thought to reduce worker turnover.

In the following decade, paid vacations became widespread (93 percent of collective bargaining agreements contained vacation provisions in 1949), and provisions were liberalized. Two innovations occurred: reducing the length of service required to earn vacation time, and awarding longer vacation periods for time of service. Vacation provisions thus expanded from one week for one to four years of service, to two weeks after as little as two years of service. And upper-rank workers could expect to be paid for a three-week vacation with fifteen years of service. By 1956, only 18 percent of hourly employees were held to a two-week ceiling of vacations, and paid holidays were more common. Management trade literature boasted that “longer vacations and additional holidays are giving the employee more leisure at no loss in pay.” Vacation taking had achieved its acceptance because industrialists realized that “our people are human beings and planned time-off recreation is a vital thing. . . . From a selfish point of view, it pays off both to the employee and the company.” Indeed, an economist pointed out that both workers and employers were so convinced of the benefits of vacationing that they sacrificed “possible greater gains in real income.”

The spreading network of interstates and the upgrading of highways paved the way for car travel. In the summer of 1956 President Dwight D.
Eisenhower signed the $25 billion Federal-Aid Highway Act, which authorized federal funding for constructing interstate highways and created an ongoing fund supported by a federal tax on fuel. The federal government would henceforth pay 90 percent of construction costs of highways set to exacting federal standards. The legislation stipulated that construction of the interstate highway system was to be completed by 1972. The legislation was met with immense enthusiasm by mayors, manufacturers, and consumers alike. In a series of articles in the popular press about highways and safety called Freedom of the American Road, Ford Motor Company linked the new roadways with the idea of American mobility. More roads meant more freedom for Americans to travel wherever they wanted.5

The popular press educated readers on how to adjust to the changes in the roads. Family magazines like Better Homes and Gardens featured articles explaining the new roadway system to their readers. “You’ll be on one-way ribbons of highway so wide and safe your whole family can feel free from strain and worry,” promised one writer. Some feared the higher speed limits made the new roads more dangerous, or that they were monotonous because they bypassed historic towns. Their merits were faster travel through better engineering: “You don’t follow winding valleys—you zoom right across them.” Safety was a big selling point: “you’ll never meet a car coming your way.” The new highways meant an “escape from roads that have dotted our landscape with death.” Of course, drivers had to learn to drive differently at higher speeds, with plenty of distance between cars to avoid rear-end crashes. Still, readers were told that “your family is at least four times safer than on ordinary roads.”6

Already 1,600 miles of highway were in use in eighteen states and another thousand miles were under construction in 1956. Ohio had opened a cross-state toll road that linked Midwest and East “for modern travel.” Indiana’s toll road connected Chicago with New England, and in Massachusetts, a road through the Berkshire Mountains tied it to New York State’s Thruway. Route 66 was pushing from Chicago to Springfield, Missouri, and Oklahoma was constructing a turnpike to link Tulsa to Oklahoma City.7 The building frenzy of highway construction transformed vacationing by allowing travelers to go further and faster on the new roads.

The Family Car

The family road trip took shape in a culture of automobility characterized by widespread automobile ownership. Car ownership by families rose
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from 54 percent in 1948 to 77 percent in 1960 and 82 percent by 1970. The
family car was a home on wheels, an extension of the domestic space, and
thus represented a sense of security for the traveling family on the road.
Car manufacturers appealed to American consumers’ sense of the car as
part of home in their advertising. In 1949 Ford advertised its popular sedan
as “a living room on wheels!” Even its seats were “sofa wide.” The fam-
ily car was a cocoon that buffered the family from the outside world and
increased their sense of security while they traveled to unfamiliar places.

Car ownership increased dramatically after the war. As factories
switched from wartime to peacetime production, automobile compa-
ies reassured consumers that cars would soon be available for purchase.
Wartime shortages of steel and rubber meant 25 percent would wait for
a new car before going on vacation, and many would need to wait for
new tires. Ford Motor Company’s 1946 ad campaign declared “There’s
a Ford in your future” and featured illustrations of families gazing into a
crystal ball to see a vision of themselves in the new vehicle. Families were
thus asked to picture themselves in the car they could not yet buy. Ford
made a strong pitch to the family with a scene of a mother and daughter
dressed in traveling clothes watching Dad load luggage into the trunk.
Its headline noted, “It’s big new H.P. V-8 engine says: Let’s Go!” The
copy appealed to those who would take the family car on vacation: “You’ll
want to start packing your suitcases when you own the big new Ford!”
Another ad emphasized that the ride was “smoother than ever.” The fam-
ily scene pictured in the ad showed the backseat of the car, where the ride
was so smooth that Mother could knit, Son could color with crayons,
and Little Sister could sleep soundly while cuddling her plush toy. As
families waited for a car, they could plan a vacation, promised an ad that
pictured Dad in an easy chair looking at a travel brochure, with Son look-
ong on and Mother perched on the armrest. The Ford would be worth the
wait because “From start to finish of jaunt or journey you’ll ride in gentle
comfort. And as mile as carefree mile unrolls, you’ll discover this new car
is thrifty, too.”

Buying a car was seen as a decision involving the entire family. “FORD’S
OUT FRONT WITH ALL THE FAMILY!” was the headline in 1947 as Ameri-
cans were on the market for a new vehicle. The advertising copy was in-
clusive: it stressed the input of each family member in choosing a Ford.
Dad liked the engine’s power, Mother the “roomy interior” and “deep,
soft seats,” Sister “the smooth lines and ‘baked-on’ enamel finish,” and
Brother the “king-size brakes” and “Lifeguard” body. Ford Lifeguard’s
heavy-gauge body was a safety feature promoted in ads.
Car manufacturers appealed to women, who were behind the wheel more often than before the war. Women's magazines featured Ford ads that declared, "Ford's out front with Mrs. America!" The ads appealed to women as mothers who would feel safe in the car or housewives running errands who liked the way the car handled. Working women were also featured in the ads, such as an interior decorator who said, "If I were paid to 'do' Ford interiors I couldn't do a better job." A schoolteacher boasted that the car got her to school on time, emphasizing its reliability. The car as an extension of home was used to justify women's use of cars, as one clever headline proclaimed, "A Woman's Place is in the Home Ford!"

As auto production reached 6,672,000 passenger cars in 1950, an increase of 30 percent over 1949, men had the final say on buying a car, so manufacturers appealed to men in car ads. Ads that featured all members of the family pointing out the car's features to Dad reinforced his decision-making power when it came to buying a car. In "Pop played dumb about the new Ford," the children did the research and told Dad which car to buy before he admits that he already bought the car. Dad's pipe and armchair enhanced his authority as the children gathered at his knee. Ford ads dealt with men's concern about the value of a dollar by promising that you could "take an extra week's vacation on what you save" by buying a Ford. Despite the family councils, Dad was the one who bought the family car.

The station wagon was the quintessential family car, roomy enough for the bigger postwar family and their gear. Ford began marketing the station wagon as a family car in 1947, but the decade of the 1950s was the heyday of the station wagon. Ford produced 29,000 wagons in 1950, and ten times that in 1955. Production peaked at 340,000 in 1956, and then dipped to 172,000 in 1960. The cost of a station wagon rose as amenities were added to the car, from just over $2,000 to $2,685 as a factory price in 1959. Customers could choose a base model or select from the City Squire models with heavier engines, greater capacity, and more doors.

Advertisements for station wagons that appeared in family magazines emphasized their spacious interiors with illustrations showing how much (or how many) could fit in one car. "There's always room for one more in a Ford Ranch Wagon," declared a 1954 ad showing four children and a dog. The station wagon was big enough for Dad to load furniture or Mother to bring along a baby carriage. In 1957, Ford added a third seat to its Country Squire wagon, so it could accommodate nine passengers. By 1964, when those babies had hit their growth spurts, the wagon was the only answer to a growing family. One ad depicted the plight of a mother
with a large family: “She had so many children she didn’t know what to do—until she got a new Ford wagon.” Plymouth wagon advertisements claimed, “you get more kid-and-cargo room than you’ll ever fill up.”

Consumer choices about family cars were shaped by what buyers thought would work for the family vacation. Ford boasted that “There’s no vacation like a Ford vacation” in its 1956 ad for Thunderbird. Advertisements set cars in beach or shoreline scenes, or pictured them in landscapes of the West. Ford’s Ranch Wagon, pictured in a Colorado corral, was meant for the West. The western theme appeared also in discussions about the cost of a car. Ford boasted that its car was “Big Chief of the Low-Price Tribe,” and that “never did so little ‘wampum’ buy so much car.” Buyers were advised to “come in for a Pow Wow on the new kind of Ford.” Chevrolet featured its 1954 Delray Coupe in a scene with mother unloading groceries at a woodsly cabin, while Boy plays with the dog and Sister carries a tennis racket. The copy read, “That family up there has everything it takes to enjoy a wonderful vacation—a fine place to go and a fine new Chevrolet to get them there.”

American Motors advertised its Rambler 1962 Cross Country Station Wagon as an “amazing vacation machine!” Equipped with “Airliner Reclining Seats” for sleeping or napping, “it makes travel less tiring.” Air-conditioning kept the passengers cool, and “with luggage in the Travel Rack, the big cargo area becomes a king-size playpen.” Rambler emphasized the car’s ability on the road: “It performs better, and you can feel it. Starts. Hills. Straightaways. Every way. In short it makes the greatest vacation you ever spent.”

In an appeal to the instincts of parents to make vacations educational, in the summer of 1959 Ford advertised its car as “America’s schoolhouse on wheels.” The illustration depicted a Mercury Country Cruiser and called it a “home away from home for the whole family.” The four-person family was surrounded by historical figures, and ad copy declared, “It’s a big country, and our history was made all over it. The way to see it is by car. Traveling great distances is no problem in our full-sized, comfortable American cars.” The educational appeal was also patriotic, featuring the car as a vehicle to the heroes of the past, from New England’s forefathers to Abraham Lincoln’s Illinois, and “across the great plains to the place where Custer stood against the Indians.”

Family cars were meant for family fun, and advertisements reinforced the idea that recreation improved family relations. An ad for the Plymouth Suburban station wagon in 1957 offered a testimonial: “Life has taken on a big lift for the whole family since we got our new Suburban.”
There's always room for one more

in a FORD Ranch Wagon!

Now four Ford quick-change artists...and each with
the smooth, agile Go of Ford's modern V8 engine!

If your family's young and rambling,
you'll find room aplenty in Ford's new
Mainline or Customline Ranch Wagons.
Both are 6-passengers big, yet convert
to cargo haulers by merely folding the
"stowaway" seat into the floor. Ford
also offers the 4-door, 6-passenger

No matter which Ford "wagon" suits
your needs, you may have the most
modern V-8 engine in the industry (or
most modern fix, if you prefer)...new
Ball-Joint Front Suspension...colorful
interiors...and a host of other
"Worth More" advantages which make
Ford your smartest station wagon buy!

Worth More when you buy it...Worth More when you sell it!

Station wagons were roomy and comfortable for long vacations. Ford Ranch Wagon, 1954.
(Author's collection.)
Auto companies like Ford promoted the educational value of vacations to sell cars.

*America's Schoolhouse on Wheels, 1959. (Courtesy Benson Ford Research Center.)*

The illustration pictured the family at the beach with three children, Dad holding a picnic basket and daughter ready to toss a beach ball off the tailgate. The Suburban's third rear-facing seat made even more room for bigger families. Plymouth called it the “Observation Seat” and promised, “Kids love it!”

The growing size of the family car satisfied a consumer appetite for size. In 1959 Ford proclaimed in its ads: “Our cars are family-sized—comfortable and roomy—because that’s how America wants them.” Ford advertisements boasted, “it takes broad-shouldered automobiles—our typical American cars—to fit our new ways of living in this country. Put the groceries in the rear, packages on the floor, put the paint in the trunk with the wallpaper, and be careful of the flowers.” Ford cars were “America’s family shopping cart,” with “plenty of room.” Advertisements like this one highlighted middle-class consumerism and the appetite for cars big enough to hold all the goods prosperity could buy.

Although family cars of the 1950s had a sturdy auto body and good brakes, they were not equipped with passenger restraints. Some recommended seat belts for “comfort and safety” as early as the mid-1950s. One travel writer suggested, “they brace Mother when Dad’s driving on winding roads.” But critics warned that they could cause internal injuries or
slow escape from a car on fire or underwater. A “safety pillow,” a crude precursor to today’s airbag, could be purchased and attached to the dashboard with suction cups. Safety equipment became more important with the 1966 National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (effective January 1968), which mandated that manufacturers equip new vehicles with lap or shoulder belts, padded instrument panels, seat backs, sun visors, and armrests. The first child restraint standards in 1971 banned flimsy child car seats that hooked over the seatback, and it required that all child car restraints be anchored and pass tests for rigidity. With that law, child seats had to be designed to protect a child in the event of a crash. Still, car safety seats for children were not in general use until the 1980s, so most children were free to move around the car on family road trips. The lack of safety restraints made taking children in the car a complicated challenge, as we shall see.

Planning the Vacation

The family vacation required careful planning and budgeting. Oil companies helped their customers get on the road (and consume their products) by publishing travel guides. Shell Oil Company created a travel guide written by their women’s travel director, Carol Lane. This “invaluable guide book” was to “fit into the glove compartment of any car.” The foreword makes clear that Lane is writing for women readers when she says that “traveling by car is like baking a cake. If you don’t know how to do it, it can fall flat.” Readers needed her guide just as much as they needed their cookbooks. Indeed, “this book contains hundreds of recipes for car travel.” Lane guaranteed good results because her advice had been “road tested by thousands of inveterate car travelers.” If readers used the guide, their next trip would be “more fun, more comfortable, and less expensive.” Despite its womanly tone, vacation decisions were generally made by both husband and wife, with women making the decision more often at the lower end of the economic scale, and men more often for those with higher incomes.

The Shell guide advised readers to plan but not overplan their trips. Sensitive to the limits of time and the family budget, the guide advised a brainstorming session and then narrowing the choice down to two or three alternatives. Of utmost importance was pondering the question of what a vacation was to accomplish. A vacation “should be a time to do all the things you don’t ordinarily have the opportunity to do, to see some of the things you’re interested in, but never get around to.” Once the general destination was agreed upon, the guide advised using a map (from Shell,
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of course) to determine the radius of two hundred to three hundred miles a day. Then readers should write to the sources of information about the destination: “automobile clubs, state tourist bureaus, and local chambers of commerce.” Only after receiving information should families make final plans.23

Next, the family should look at the budget. The largest expense was accommodations, estimated at $7 a day, for double occupancy ($4 for one person). Hotels rates varied from $5 to $30 a day, plus tips of 10 percent. Rates for children were less, but children were not free. Given the charges for children, it was not unheard of for parents to sneak children past the manager into the room so they would not be charged. To reduce expenses, travelers could choose to camp (about $1 a night) or stay in a tourist court. In 1954, when this guide was published, motels had not yet developed nationwide franchise networks, so the best alternative to an expensive hotel was a cheaper tourist court.24

Food was a variable expense, calculated at about $3.50 a day per person, with an additional $2.60 per person a day for entertainment and tips. Automobile operating costs were less variable. Fuel costs were projected to be 2.1 cents a mile, or about 28 cents a gallon. For a two-week vacation of 1,500 miles, auto maintenance costs (fuel and tolls) were estimated to be about $50. Finally, vacation planners were advised to take into account the costs of entertainment, such as entrance fees to parks, fishing license fees, rental of sports equipment, laundry expenses, and miscellaneous expenses for “those minor items that you meant to bring from home but forgot.” To keep an eye on expenses, travelers should keep track of expenses so they would not run out of money, or so that they could afford a “splurge” at the end of the trip.25

WHAT TO PACK

Vacations required a special wardrobe, according to the Shell guide. Women should think of taking four “costumes” for a two-week vacation, outfits that were versatile and would fit into a twenty-six-inch suitcase. First on the list was a travel suit of skirt, jacket, and blouse. The jacket could be removed in warmer weather, and it should have a cut that allowed ease of movement. Straight skirts were to be avoided because they rode up while sitting or driving, so full or gored skirts were recommended. Fabrics should be lightweight wool or a synthetic blend in “medium tones of gray, beige, black, navy, and brown.” For evening, the guide recommended a two-piece dress that could be worn informally or dressed up. The blouse should have a neckline “that can be worn prim or plunging,” and the fabric
should be a dressier synthetic, silk, or jersey. Rounding out the wardrobe was a “spectator sports ensemble” of a skirt, colorful strapless or halter top, and a bolero jacket in matching color. The jacket could be removed in the heat or worn “for the sake of propriety or for protection against the evening breeze.” Finally, a woman on the road would need a “rugged-life costume” of sports blouse and shorts (or the flattering pedal pushers). Because “slacks are frowned upon” in many resorts, especially the East, women were advised to wear pants only when engaged in active sports.26

Women were advised to take along accessories of low-heeled shoes, one “roomy purse” and an evening clutch, two scarves, two sets of jewelry (daytime and glittering), and two belts. A stole might be added for evening. A “crushable, versatile” hat was essential, perhaps a velvet cloche or sporty beret. For bad weather, women should take along a light raincoat, sweater, and “drizzle boots.” Lingerie should include a nightgown, robe, “two slips, two bras, two pairs of gloves or socks, three pairs of panties and stockings.” What to pack depended on the destination. For a resort, she might also need a bathing suit, beach cover-up, extra shirt, shorts, and “play shoes.” For outdoors, she should pack “dungarees” (denim trousers), a sport jacket, and hiking shoes. For a city trip, an extra dress and walking shoes would suffice.27

Men were advised to take a gray suit and a blue suit, a tan sport coat, and brown slacks for a total of nine outfits. Synthetic fibers meant men could reduce the number of shirts, sport shirts, and socks because they “are easily washable, require no pressing, and dry in from three to six hours.” The guide contained much less detail for men than for women, but it did not trust men’s fashion sense. It cautioned men against wearing “the wild- est and brightest clothes they can find” because “garish” clothing would stand out and reduce the versatility of the wardrobe. Men were advised to go to a clothing store for advice and to “select garments which will not look as if they have been slept in after a few hours of wear.” Presumably women bought men’s clothes or store clerks told them what to wear because men could not be trusted to pick out their own travel wardrobe.28

Children’s wardrobes were simpler. Most important was to pack washable and wrinkle-resistant clothing or the new synthetics like Orlon, nylon, and rayon, or good-quality cotton and wool. The goal was to “keep the squirming car rider looking reasonably neat” and to cut down on luggage space by packing less clothing. Slacks were appropriate for both boys and girls, and they could be made out of denim or other easy-care fabrics. Children should not wear dungarees in the car because “they’re not suitable for wear even in a roadside restaurant. They should be packed
the wardrobe less or halter dresses be removed on against the a "rugged-life" (dal pushers), ally the East, active sports, 26 heeled shoes, sets of jewelry added for velvet cloche or light raincoat, higmat gown, robe, panties and a resort, she t, shorts, and nimm trousers), s and walking an sport coat, 7 meant men cause they "are to six hours." 6en, but it did ing "the wild-thing would were advised which will not ." Presumably to wear because robe. 28 to pack wash- ke Orlon, nylon was to "keep down on lug- gage" for both boys easy-care fab- ric "they’re not ould be packed only for emergencies." Girls could look more “feminine” in “wide, easy-to move-around-in skirts,” and boys should have a jacket and both should have a sweater. Cotton T-shirts were best for both boys and girls, but parents should also take along “smartly styled” collared shirts for the children that would not require boys to wear a tie. Synthetic fabrics were promoted as easy to wash and iron. Nylon underwear for girls would dry quickly, but more changes of underwear would be needed for boys who wore “slower-drying cotton.” 29

Packing was a process that also required good planning, and again, it seemed to be best left up to the mother. Adults needed a large suitcase and an overnight bag, and rather than combining clothing, each child should have her own bag. Proper planning meant a dry run of loading luggage into the trunk or onto a rack on top of the car. Mother should write down a list of what was needed on the trip and check off each item as it was packed or purchased. Detailed instructions were given on how to pack a suitcase, including using cellophane tape and “pliofilm bags” for toiletries. Coats could be hung in the back of the car and “small items in a shoe bag hung over the back of the front seat.” Toys, maps, sunglasses, booklets, combs, and brushes fit neatly in a shoe bag, making them more convenient for travelers. In addition to clothing, travelers should take items now standard in motels: alarm clock, folding ironing board and travel iron, and even clothes hangers. Toiletries like facial tissue, sewing kit, toothpaste, shampoo, and washcloth were on the list of what to pack, as well as medicinal items like aspirin and a first aid kit. Summer vacationers added “sun lotion” and sun glasses. The list was very, very long. 30

DRIVING INSTRUCTIONS

While Mother was packing, Father’s job was to have the car serviced. Lube and oil change were imperative, and brakes and steering should be checked for safety. Travelers should make sure the tires had proper pressure and were not too worn, that all lights worked, and that windshield wipers effectively cleaned the windshield. Equipment like a jack and car tools were a must, and a flashlight and flares were handy “if you get stuck on a lonely road.” Before leaving, the final touch was having the car washed and upholstery cleaned. 31

The Guide had a full chapter on how to care for a car in all seasons, but one of the most common problems for summer vacationers was an overheated engine. The solution was to pull over and wait until the temperature fell below 190 degrees. To prevent accidental burns from steam, only after at least a twenty-minute wait should the radiator cap be removed,
and then by unscrewing it with a thick rag or towel. Water should be added slowly; ice cold water could crack an engine block.32

Driving in deserts required special instructions. Service stations were few and far between in the western deserts, so drivers were advised to carry an emergency supply of gasoline and water. Travelers commonly hung a canvas water bag on the front of the car to be air-cooled by evaporation. Because not all roads were paved, drivers should carry a shovel and a towrope. And because few cars had air-conditioning, travelers dealt with the heat by mounting shades on the windows, and perhaps by buying or renting an inexpensive evaporative cooler. Cheaper still were cardboard coolers loaded with dry ice that could be wedged into a partially open window. Unfortunately, the person closest to the cooler tended to be hit with flakes of dry ice, and those further away could barely feel the cold breeze. Another device was the “air scoop,” which directed air from the window into the passenger space. For those with the money, by the early 1960s, FrigiKing air conditioners could be “easily and quickly installed in a new car or your present car.”33

Mountain driving presented new challenges. It was wise to adjust the carburetor idle setting for the lower oxygen in the air at high altitudes. The guide stated, “The keynote to mountain driving is caution.” Steep grades and sharp turns made it important to stay in one’s own lane and pay attention to shifting gears at the proper time. Cooler temperatures posed the danger of icy roads, so travelers should check with the highway patrol to avoid being trapped by bad weather. Drivers were warned not to stop by the side of the road to admire scenery, but to use the turnouts provided. When parking, it was advisable to set the parking brake and block the wheel with a rock.34

Vacation driving was different from everyday driving because not only did one travel in unfamiliar terrain, one also drove for long stretches of time. To avoid boredom in flat terrain, drivers were advised to take breaks from hours behind the wheel. The driver confronted a different set of traffic regulations in each state, so the guide gave advice on how to deal with the “traffic officer” without crying, lying, or bullying. Driving advice concluded with instructions to passengers: don’t be a backseat driver, and “keep children from climbing over the front seat” or blocking the view from the rearview mirror.35

The Backseat

The Shell travel guide admitted that travel with children could be a “nightmare” but assured readers that good planning could make a trip “a
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marvelous experience for the entire family.” In addition to the educational
value of the trip, “a car tour welds your family together through the shar-
ing of new experiences.” Just as at home, it was important to maintain a
routine for children. Parents should take along toys, books, and games to
entertain young children; older children would want to have sports equip-
ment like a tennis racket or fishing rod. Women’s magazines suggested
toys and games to keep “squabbling and roughhousing by children” to a
minimum. Everyone remembers the standard game of identifying state
license plates and the game of putting together a menu from billboards.36

Travel guidebooks advised parents to control children’s behavior by
establishing firm rules like “Don’t annoy the driver” and “Don’t play
with the dashboard controls or the cigarette lighter.” Children should be
warned not to stick their arms or heads out the window and not to play
with the door locks. Parents were advised to load their suitcases between
the front and back seats to create a level surface on which they could place
a crib mattress. This “playpen” made a contained space for children where
they could rest or play with their toys in the backseat. Other devices were
available to make children comfortable or to constrain their movement,
such as the Trav-L-Tot Hammock, which mounted on the windowsills
of the backseat, “leaving the seats themselves free for passengers while
moppets snooze or play.” Straps on the hammock could be used to “keep
energetic small fry in place,” but its usefulness was limited by the need to
keep both side windows fully open at all times.37

Children routinely traveled in the front of the car, sitting between par-
ents on the wide upholstered bench seat. One way to entertain them was
to allow them to pretend they were driving. The Junior Steering Wheel
cost only $3 and attached to the dashboard with suction cups. Car seats,
made of a steel frame with rubber hooks that fit over the back of the front
seat, contained children with a strap that prevented them from sliding
out. “Sit and stand seats” allowed a child to stand up to “stretch his legs”
and look out the front windshield.38 Such seats were designed to contain
and entertain children, not protect them in case of a crash.

Traveling with children meant stopping often to eat or sleep before
children got too hungry or tired. The Shell guide advised, “If children
get tired and cranky, stop and let them romp around for a while.” Parents
could travel with gadgets that allowed them to drive for longer periods,
without rest stops for the children. Dee’s Half-Pint was a portable plastic
urinal for boys. The Car Jonn portable toilet had plastic throwaway liners,
suitable for use by young girls. The invention in the early 1960s of Play-
tex disposable baby bottles eliminated the chore of washing bottles on
The Rothstein children shared the territory of the backseat on a family vacation in 1957. (Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, LOOK Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.)

the road. Bottle warmers plugged into the car’s cigarette lighter; bottles would heat in about ten minutes. In 1956 consumers could buy a “Baby on the go” traveling kit, with “baby oil, cream, powder, lotion, soap, and cotton buds.” Perhaps the greatest invention for families traveling with babies was the disposable diaper, in common use by the mid-1970s for traveling.39

Taking the whole family could also mean taking along the family dog. The veterinarian who wrote the column “Your Pet and Mine” in Better Homes and Gardens advised readers to have the dog checked by the veterinarian before they left on vacation, and to obtain certificates and dog
tags so they would not be delayed at borders. Dog owners were told to pack dog dishes, leash, comb, and blanket. Smart travelers checked ahead to see which motels welcomed pets. While traveling, dogs should sit in their assigned place in the car, with a break every few hours. The vet cautioned travelers not to leave the dog in the car alone on hot days because “the heat could make him sick.” In a new place, a dog should be kept on a leash to avoid encounters with other animals, like skunks and porcupines.\(^\text{40}\) Going on vacation meant taking the whole family, including the pets.

Children’s books and toys prepared them for travel as they entertained. *The Golden Book of Automobile Stamps* (1932) boasted, “Today countless families take off for cross-country trips by car, with packets of free maps from oil companies marked with the preferred routes, with guide books to point out spots of historic interest or scenic beauty, and other guide books to suggest places for them to stop to eat and sleep.” In fact, children were informed that they lived in “A Nation of Tourists,” where “Sixty million tourists each year stop in the tens of thousands of motels, hotels, tourist homes, camps, and resorts of the country.” By 1952 over 62 million licensed drivers roamed the 48 states in 50 million cars on 1,750,000 miles of highways, statistics recited to impress young readers. Indeed, children who licked and pasted the stamps picturing automobiles into the coloring book learned that they lived in “Our Automobile World.”\(^\text{41}\)

Activity books for children provided pencil games like connect-the-dot drawings of animals, matching, and crosswords. The *Travel Fun Book for Boys and Girls* (1954) included a grid where children earned points for spotting various makes of automobile, from Chevrolet to Studebaker, twenty-one in all. The games educated as they entertained, like the page on Missouri that included a crossword puzzle with clues such as “The Wizard of __” or “Mountain Range in Missouri.” A nearly blank page provided a space for children to copy the Burma-Shave poems they saw along the roadway, and a “License Decoder” game showed children how to convert license plate numbers into “actual words.” The one with the most words at the end of the trip was the winner.\(^\text{42}\)

Car activity books also taught children how to encounter the environment by making collections of seashells, wildflowers, leaves, bottles of sand, or stones. Children were advised to choose carefully as they collected, and to discard all but the most interesting or perfectly formed objects. Collecting soil involved filling a jar with half-inch layers separated by cotton to make an “attractive” paperweight or gift. The book instructed children how to press leaves between pieces of tissue paper under
a heavy object before pasting into an album. For all collections, the book told children to document when and where they found the object.43

Children's collections became souvenirs of the trip once at home: shells could be used as ashtrays or paperweights, glued around a picture frame, or strung together for jewelry. Maps could be pasted onto wastebaskets or trays and shellacked to make them shiny and waterproof. Postcards could be pasted together and cut into shapes to make a puzzle. Stones could become paperweights or doorstops; they could fill a jar to hold pencils; or they could fill a beanbag. Any object could be collected—matchbooks, bottle caps, menus, luggage stickers, or maps. By collecting, children made markers in their trip that they could narrate as they remembered it later.44

The activity book taught children how to take “snapshots” that would be lasting mementos of their travels. Rather than take pictures of “nearly everything,” children were told to compose their pictures carefully before they hit the shutter button. For example, they should add a person to the foreground of a landmark for more interest. “Thus ‘Mother looking at Niagara Falls’ will be more enjoyed later, rather than just ‘Niagara Falls’ alone.” The young photographer should also pay attention to the background: “In your interest in snapping Dad changing a tire, you may forget to look at what is behind him.” No instruction was too basic: “pictures of things in motion will not turn out well.” The limits of the black-and-white film of the era led to another tip: “Don’t be fooled by color. It won’t show in your snapshot.” These instructions helped children translate the scope of what they saw into views within the frame of the finished photograph, teaching them to read the travel landscape and convert it into standards of what was pleasing and conventional in photography.45

Quiet games like “I Spy” or “I Went to the Store” were designed to keep children entertained without bothering the driver. “Motoring Games” involved reading license plates or maps, finding letters, or reading slogans on billboards, and they taught children reading skills or at the very least to be observant of their surroundings. Ideally, children played these games together in the backseat, but in reality, many travel games involved the cooperation of parents, if only to settle disagreements. A parent led the children in singing songs with actions, like “John Brown’s Baby” or “Ten Little Indians.” Because Dad usually drove, Mom would read stories like “The Bell,” about a visit by two children to see their grandmother in New Orleans at Mardi Gras.46

Travel Fun for Kids updated age-old games with space-age themes in the mid-1960s. Crafts projects included a “flying saucer bonnet” made
ons, the book object.\textsuperscript{43} At home: shells, picture frame, baskets, or postcards could
Stones could hold pencils, matchbooks, ting, children remembered it
\textsuperscript{44}“that would be better if safely before a person to the

\textsuperscript{45}niagara Falls’ 1 to the back.

\textsuperscript{46}“Ist Zango, a version of travel bingo, was advertised as “educational” and “the ideal way to pass miles away” for “children of all ages and grownups too.” The Family Travel Game of State License Plates promised “miles and miles of exciting fun.”\textsuperscript{48} Old-fashioned or modern, travel activity books and games were designed to keep children entertained—and educated.

Planning the family vacation required much more than getting the car tuned up and canceling the paper. Getting ready for vacation involved lists of what to pack, how to pack it, and most especially what to buy to be well-prepared for the vacation trip. Taking the entire family meant that Americans not only bought wrinkle-free clothing for themselves, but also an array of toys, activity books, and gadgets to occupy their children while on the road. The almost scientific planning for the modern vacation was a way to sell consumer products the vacationer would need while away from home.

**What to Eat, Where to Stay**

Before the advent of streamlined interstates, the American roadside was characterized by oddities: larger-than-life statues of folk heroes, petting zoos, and odd-shaped eateries.\textsuperscript{49} Journalist Bill Bryson remembered that as a boy, “the highways were scattered with diversions’ like billboards advertising glowing “atomic rock.” Bryson recalled, “My big brother and sister, squeezed into the backseat with me and having exhausted all the possibilities for diversion that came with holding me down and drawing vivid geometric patterns on my nose, face, arms, and stomach with a felt marking pen, would set up a clamor to see this world famous attraction, and I would weakly chime in.”\textsuperscript{50} For Bryson, the value of such attractions, which invariably did not live up to their advertising, was a way to make the miles pass more quickly.
Bryson remembered the older roadside motels as “thrilling” for their horrors. They were of two types: the cottagelike good ones with a shady lawn edged by white painted rocks, or the “appalling ones” that his father chose because he was a “cheapskate.” These had sagging springs in the mattresses, no air-conditioning, and frightening sounds of crimes being committed next door in the middle of the night. Remembering the nights spent in the run-down motels, he remarks ironically, “all of this, even at its worst, gave highway travel a kind of exhilarating unpredictability.” Interstate highways sidelined roadside oddities to the back roads as newer establishments clustered at the exits, making road travel more predictable but less exciting. In place of excitement, the newer roadside businesses promised a standardized experience of eating and lodging by depending on branded corporate chains.

Roadside restaurants that catered to the family traveler expanded to meet the needs of hungry families on the road in the postwar vacation boom. Before the invention of fast food restaurants, traveling with children required parents to plan ahead. Food costs could be cut in half by carrying food in the car for breakfast and lunch. The Shell guide recommended carrying sandwich supplies, milk, and fruit bought along the way. Before the era of fast food restaurants, the alternative to carrying food was to eat in roadside cafes or cafeterias, where a meal might cost $1 to $1.50. Feeding children meant “three-squares-a-day,” but young children did not always like restaurants. The guide advised parents to choose a restaurant that served smaller portions for children and did not require a long wait in line. To eliminate embarrassment when a child was at “the banging-on-the-table stage,” one parent could arrive first and order, while the other waited outside with the children. Snacks of fruits, raisins, and canned juices would be least likely to interfere with meals. If a child experienced car sickness, it was best to move him to the front seat and “give him a lemon to suck.” To prepare for car sickness, parents should carry an empty ice cream carton and a rag to clean up the inside of the car.

Howard Johnson’s chain of highway coffee shops was among the first to welcome families with children. Founded in the 1920s, by the 1940s, the chain was operating 130 restaurants in New England and Virginia. By 1951, 255 Howard Johnson restaurants, with their trademark orange roof and turquoise cupolas, dotted the turnpikes, most in the eastern United States. Their pseudo-colonial design was based on the New England town hall or church, so it symbolized an American identity to the consumer. The atmosphere was wholesome, a blend of soda fountain and dining room. Families could get their food quickly because most of it
lling” for their sins with a shady spring in the crimes being ring the nights of this, even at rectibility. roads as newer ore predictable side businesses by depending expanded to star vacation lining with chil cut in half by guide recom along the way. carrying food sight cost $1 to young children ts to choose a d not require a ild was at “the nd order, while its, raisins, and . If a child ex t seat and “give should carry an the car. among the first , by the 1940s, ad Virginia. By rk orange roof eastern United New England ity to the con a fountain and use most of it was fried. Menus featured hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken, steak, and a New England dish, fried clams. Best of all, Howard Johnson restaurants served twenty-eight flavors of ice cream. Families who stopped at Howard Johnson were counting on fast food in a friendly atmosphere at low prices, no matter what highway they were traveling.

Fast food restaurants revolutionized family travel. Former machine salesman Ray Kroc opened his first hamburger restaurant in 1955, competing with proliferating roadside franchises like Dairy Queen, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Insta-Burger-King. McDonald’s opened its one hundredth restaurant in 1959 and operated 250 by 1960. By the late 1960s, McDonald’s was the first choice of the “station wagon set.” Their motto—Quality, Service, Cleanliness, and Value—summed up the needs of growing young families, at home and on the road. McDonald’s cleverly placed their new restaurants in the expanding suburbs, with the result that when children went on vacation, they could eat out like they did at home. Because every McDonald’s had the same menu and the same food products, it was a dependable choice, with no surprises on the road. The convenience of fast food and its low price catered to American families with many mouths to feed. No more tense moments with the cranky toddler banging on the table while the food was being cooked—at McDonald’s, children’s appetites could be satisfied almost instantly, and with food they (and their parents) liked. The informality of the roadside restaurant meant you could come as you are, with no need to even comb your hair before climbing out of the car. The clean restrooms were a bonus for road travelers; a family could make just one stop to buy food and go to the bathroom. Soon the family was refreshed and fed, ready to get back in the car and get back on the highway to get to their day’s destination. And if you were behind in your itinerary, the people at McDonald’s were happy to hand over the hamburgers and fries in a paper bag so you could eat in the car.

The family vacation craze spurred the growth of the motel industry. The word motel was coined in San Luis Obispo, California, in 1926 but did not become a standard term for roadside lodging until the 1950s. The number of motels peaked in the 1960s with 61,000 in operation, and since then, the range of terms applied makes it difficult to distinguish motels from hotels. Motels replaced campgrounds or tourist homes because travelers valued safety, comfort, and convenience and were willing to pay more for amenities. John A. Jakle and Keith Sculle argue that motels are a “home away from home . . . an interface with the private automobile, further cocooning and protecting the traveler away from home.”
Consumers quickly converted to the commodified overnight experience offered by modern motels. In 1945, about half of AAA members preferred hotels with the rest staying in motor courts and tourist homes. In 1950 motorists could choose from among a half-million rooms in motels or tourist courts, a predecessor of the modern motel. By 1950 a building magazine claimed that two-thirds of all road travelers stopped at motels. Increased demand meant motels were constructed with “appealing design and landscaping” to attract travelers who viewed them from the road. As motels joined the AAA or other affiliates, motorists could reserve in advance, and roadside proximity was less important in finding lodging.56

Families were attracted to motels because they were less expensive than hotels, and motels allowed them to park near their rooms without going through a lobby or paying tips to a bellman. Business Week magazine featured the new motels in a 1952 article that featured photographs of a family checking into a motel. While the mother settled the baby in the room, the father and two sons unloaded the luggage from the trunk of the car right outside the door of the room. The photo captions explained: “Checking in is simple, involves no tips. That’s one of the motel’s best selling points. Checking out comes at any hour.”57

The phenomenon of 30,000 motels was due to the wanderlust of the American family. “The motor court business grew with the American family’s love to travel and vacation by car. Just as hotels grew up close to train and bus centers, motor courts have cashed in on the premise that motorists would like lodgings close by major highways.” Families with tired children and hungry babies found it convenient to choose motels from the highway and unload on the doorstep to their room. An exhausted father need not worry when checking in because “the motorist can arrive with a day’s stubble on his chin without worrying about disapproving glances.” Motels offered amenities such as radios, televisions, air-conditioning, and laundry facilities. Nicer motor courts offered “almost all the extras and plush of the better hotels,” at lower prices, such as “coffee shops, lounges complete with TV and writing desks, air-conditioning, tiled shower-bath installations, and mercury switches.” Motels advertised wall-to-wall carpeting, ample lighting, and brand-name mattresses to attract guests. Motels may have been homelike, but the motel stay offered Americans a taste of luxuries like swimming pools and color television—amenities many could not afford at home. Thus motels appealed to consumers’ aspirations to an upper middle-class standard of living in their accommodations.58

Families found motels convenient in part because they offered a cheap way to feed the family. Some offered free continental breakfasts, while
might experience family vacations in motels that were reminiscent of "prestigious homes. In many motels, the building design respected the road. As a result, the architecture of the motel reflected the style and materials of the nearby homes. Motels also featured swimming pools where visitors could spend extra days or two at the motor court. The old-fashioned tourist courts built in the 1930s were dingy and run-down—no place for a family with children to spend the night. The new modern motels were designed to fit the needs of the family on the road. By belonging to a chain or an association, motels could make reservations for the traveler for the next night, and guests could be assured that the motel met the standards of quality set by the association. In 1962, over half of all motels belonged to a referral organization (AAA, Quality Courts, Best Western, Master Host), and half belonged to a state association. Indeed, motel owners became so successful that hotels were adopting the features of motels, further blurring the distinction between them. As expressways and city entertainment began to draw families to the city, city hotels took on motel features like free parking to meet their needs.

Families seeking reliable lodging enthusiastically welcomed the development of franchise motor hotels in the late 1950s. Holiday Inn was the brainchild of Kemmons Wilson, who invented the nationwide branded motel franchise in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1953. He later recalled that his idea to build the franchise came from an experience he had while traveling with his family: "In 1951 my wife Dorothy and I loaded our five children into our station wagon and started on a vacation to Washington, D.C., from our home in Memphis. It didn't take us long to find that most motels had cramped, uncomfortable rooms—and they charged extra for the children. Few had decent restaurants and fewer still were air-conditioned. In short, it was a miserable trip." He realized that "the family vacation came into its own," and the money was to be made in developing motels.
Holiday Inn was the first major motel chain to allow children to stay free. Postcard ca. 1963.
(Author’s collection.)

After building the first 120-room Holiday Inn in Memphis, he sold the idea, and the blueprints, to builders, who paid a per-room, per-day royalty fee to use the Holiday Inn trademark. The success of the franchise operation depended on standardization, and as John Jakle points out, the company “developed comprehensive operational standards ranging from the details of the building design and materials, to the cleanliness of the restaurant, to the ways front-desk personnel were to handle guests.”

Holiday Inns were built for family travelers: “All had a swimming pool, air-conditioning, a restaurant on the premises, phones in every room, free ice, dog kennels, free parking, and available baby sitters.” Wilson’s mother designed rooms “which were bright and airy, with friendly, warm colors.” Architects catered to the family crowd by designing “quiet, homelike accommodations rather than the hustle of the busy hotels or the rather commercial coldness of many motels.” And in a stroke of brilliance, Wilson allowed children under 12 years to stay free. He recalled having to pay an extra $10 for his children when he traveled, and “I told my wife that I didn’t think this was fair. It wouldn’t encourage people to travel with their children. I told her I was going to build a chain of motels and I was never going to make a charge for children as long as they stayed in the same room as their parents.”

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Holiday Inn steadily expanded by meeting the needs of the roadside traveler. In 1963 Holiday Inn offered a joint credit card with Gulf Oil and two years later set up a nationwide reservation system. By 1965, nearly 1,000 Holiday Inns were spread across the country. By 1970, Holiday Inn had 1,300 properties and had expanded overseas. Although its business plan had diversified beyond the family vacationer, still it appealed to families with the construction of Holidome Inns with indoor pools and fun centers. By raising the age at which children could stay free from twelve to eighteen years of age, Holiday Inn retained the loyalty of the family traveler. Holiday Inns set a pattern for family lodging that was imitated by other roadside chain motels.64

The postwar family road trip was made possible by paid vacations and affordable family cars. Experts advised families how to perform the common tasks of planning, packing, and budgeting to meet the needs of parents traveling with children. Automobile manufacturers, oil companies, and the hospitality industry all took advantage of the family road trip to sell their products. In turn, family consumers on vacation shaped roadside culture, from fast food restaurants to motels where children stayed free. The roadside material culture of family travel helped the family feel at home away from home, no matter their destination.

The optimism of postwar consumerism was linked with the ideal of family togetherness to sell products that promised to make the family vacation a time of love and harmony. Of course, in reality vacations could not possibly fulfill the sunny expectations of their promoters, from Madison Avenue to the family travel guides. Humorist Peg Bracken gently poked fun at the family vacation in 1959, acknowledging that getting through a vacation “is harder than it looks.” Members of the family can never agree on what sights to see, and everyone looks like a mess when Mother decides there is no use traveling in good clothes. The photos of Buddy and Sis by the Hoover Dam can be unflattering, but pictures are necessary because “you must have something to show the neighbors back home.” The worst part was returning home to open a huge stack of mail, to see the holes the moles dug in the lawn, or to make a meal from the half-empty box of wilted cornflakes, all that was left in the kitchen cupboard.65

A vacation was not only “harder than it looks,” but it also threatened the very family togetherness that it was intended to foster. Women’s magazines published advice from experts like the trusted Dr. Benjamin Spock, who asked, “Can parents and children share vacation fun?” But like the guidebooks, the dangers of family togetherness could be avoided.
with good planning, compromise, and the right equipment. The alternative—leaving the children at home—was almost unthinkable. In “Vacation for Two,” a sentimental poem about a couple on a getaway without their children who discover that their children have secretly stowed a doll and a teddy bear in their suitcase, think fondly of home and realize, “we missed two treasures we could not go out and buy.” The guilt of leaving the children behind with Grandma was worse to bear than the exasperation of taking care of the little ones on the road. Only if the whole family traveled together in the family car were they taking a real family vacation. To know where they went, and why, we must understand the America they saw.66