

A MOVING STORY

By Gladys Whitlock

In common with many restless American families, we have moved often. Work has taken us to live in a dozen states, some of them more than once and a couple foreign countries. We have traveled to our new homes by train, plane and car. Some of the trips were smooth and efficient; some filled with problems, but one stands out above all the others.

Most of our trips had been made in an unswerving bee-line for the next destination. Taking time for sight-seeing was out of the question. For this trip, however, I and my three daughters decided to take a camping trip down the Pacific coast from Seattle to Los Angeles. My husband thought it was a crazy idea, but since a business commitment would keep him from going with us, his vote didn't count. Thank goodness!

He assured our next door neighbor he wasn't worried about us. After all, our three girls were nearly grown, and any one who had no better sense than to bother four women would deserve whatever he got. Promising to meet us at my mother's home in L.A., he left in indecent haste.

On our final morning in Seattle, we stood guard over the camping gear while the moving men carried out everything else that had made the apartment home. What was left didn't take up much space in the corner of the empty living room, but there seemed to be a lot more when we began to load it in the car.

The floor of the back seat was packed level with the seat and padded with sleeping bags to make a very large bed. One of Joanie's college classmates came to say goodbye and stayed to do the heavy work. He was strong and willing, but not very experienced. The trunk sagged noticeably as he triumphantly slammed the lid shut. I was too grateful for his help and too eager to get started to quarrel with the results.

Sharon and Gina climbed in back leaving room between them for the last item, a wicker basket containing Ming Li, our Siamese mama cat, and five three-week-old kittens. As we rolled out of the apartment complex I had to sit up very straight to see over the hood, but we were on our way!

Joanie had taken possession of her dad's movie camera and she set about recording the

beginning of our safari. Since she had never handled the camera before, this took a little study and the first reel begins with a lovely close-up of Joan's knee and then charts a wavering course down the highway.

A sense of elation and high adventure filled the car and even Ming Li was taking it well. Ordinarily she disliked riding in the car and complained vigorously, but that day she seemed relaxed, as she groomed her kittens and ignored her surroundings . . . for a while. As we left the city traffic behind, our speed increased to the highway maximums and so did the cat's uneasiness. She left her basket and began exploring with an occasional unhappy cry. Although it was a lovely day, we closed the windows and turned on the air conditioner to prevent an attempted escape. Ming Li stepped up her protests. She scratched at the windows, crawled under the front seat and cried constantly. If you've every had a Siamese, you know what a nerve rending sound they can make. It was pure bedlam for over an hour, long enough for me to begin to doubt the wisdom of the entire "camping trip." Then the noise stopped abruptly. She sniffed her basket inquiringly, flipped her tail several times, snuggled among her hungry kittens and never complained again.

As one annoyance abated, I became increasingly aware of another. Our load was so far off balance that the car seemed unwieldy. I felt an urge to lean forward in an attempt to keep the front wheels firmly on the pavement. Our original plan for an early stop was reinforced by the need to re-pack and we began to look for a place to camp. When we found a neat little Oregon State Park with secluded camping spaces, it was only four P.M. We were less than two hundred miles from our starting point, but at least, we had crossed the state line . . . barely. That was alright. We girls could make it our "camping trip" rather than a Bataan style forced-march to the next destination.

It took all the remaining daylight hours to unpack and balance the load, stretch a tarp shelter from the car to the ground, pump the air mattresses and cook supper over a smokey camp fire. In addition to the movie camera we carried two other camera's. No matter what the action in that camp, someone was usually recording it for posterity.

Ming Li, however, didn't approve of the situation. We put the kittens out on a blanket. She promptly proceeded to return them to the car becoming so upset that we were finally forced

to put her and her family in the front seat while the back was being rearranged. Having accepted the car, she flatly refused to leave it, even so far as we could tell, for a call of nature. How she handled that problem the first night, we never did know.

As darkness grew we put a little more wood on the fire and sat close listening to the soft night sounds and watching the stars appear. The flickering circle of light created a cozy oasis among the shadows, bringing a sense of wonder and hushed voices. Hot flames gave way to deep red coals with black edges and a chill crept in from behind. Reluctantly, we drowned the coals and headed for the sleeping bags.

The next morning the air was crisp and no one lingered over dressing. It gave zest to both appetite and spirits and we were soon fed, packed and on our way again.

Our chosen route was Highway 101 and we came into it just north of Canon Beach in Oregon. The highway winds along miles of beautiful white shoreline studded with picturesque black rocks. In one deep cove aptly named “The Devil’s Elbow” the road almost doubles back on itself. The area was wild and supposedly harbored sea lions among its protecting rocks, but we didn’t see any. It was too cool and windy to explore the beach, but a beautiful day for driving. The girls, in high spirits, were inspired to compose a ballad dedicated to our travels. With much giggling and foolishness, Highway 101 unrolled smoothly behind us.

About mid-morning Ming Li became very restless and began sniffing and pulling at the blanket, so we stopped and carried her down to the edge of the sand. She was strictly an apartment cat, living a very confined life, and that beach was the most sand she had ever seen. In her excitement she scooped out five or six holes in rapid succession before she seemed to remember what she was doing it for.

A short way down the highway we found an efficient little center that appeared to exist only for its tourist trade. Perfect for our next stop. We filled the gas tank and ate hamburgers and fries looking out a window with an ocean view. The water was unusually blue and each majestic wave carried its white crest into a foaming half moon on the sand. Gull’s rasping cries contrasted with their smooth gliding flight and we could see pelicans skimming and diving beyond the rolling swells. It was with reluctance that we finally gave up watching and climbed back into the car.

It was getting late when we pulled into a vacant space in another small campground. Our muscles were stiff from long hours of sitting, but camp chores soon loosened them up. After a hurried evening meal, we grabbed towels and soap and followed the arrows to the public shower hidden in the heart of the grove. It wasn't the last word in luxury, but we never enjoyed a shower more. There was little incentive to linger around the campfire that night as we were tired and the mosquitos were present and hungry.

Late the next morning we bought some soft drinks and headed into a reserved section of the giant redwoods, planning on making a short rest stop and spending some time among the huge trees. Ming Li changed all plans.

We had barely open our drinks in the awesome stillness of the forest when Ming jumped out of the partly open door in a frenzied struggle to get out of her harness. If she had succeeded and run into that forest we would have lost her. By the time I reached her she was almost free with only one loop of the leather still around her body. Grabbing the leash, I lifted and swung her into the back seat. One window was partly open and she attempted to go through it, but Joanie quickly pushed the button to close it. The cat's head was imprisoned in the opening for a few seconds before my daughter could release it and then close the window. Ming then jumped on the back of the seat next to the window, crouching there, she growled at every sound, even the mewing of her kittens. Her eyes were glazed in a frightening blank stare. We didn't dare touch her. Everyone got into the car with extreme caution and we continued our trip, tensely watching her every move. She crouched in place for nearly two hours until the redwoods were many miles behind us. Gradually the wild look left her eyes and she came down to the basket and began to groom and feed her kittens. What on earth did she sense in those ancient woods that we humans could not hear, see, smell, for feel? Something literally drove her out of her mind. It puts one in need of a long talk with Tolkien's Treebeard.

Just above San Francisco, we left Highway 101 to visit my Aunt Leah who lived in Pittsburg California. She was our family's version of Auntie Mame and there was no way we could pass up a chance to visit her. She had told us that we would need to cross the new bridge at Benecia to reach Pittsburg. Finding the bridge was no problem but once across the bridge, new construction left huge pieces of construction machinery, great mounds of earth and no names on

anything but the new bridge. We tried each road in turn taking it far enough to conclude it was not the one we needed, circling back and trying again. It was late by the time we reached Leah's and we happily spread our sleeping bags on her livingroom floor. I was almost asleep when I heard one daughter say to the others, "Well, you have to admit that traveling with mother is not only adventurous, but with all the unplanned tours of many of the cities we pass through, it's also educational." I sniffled a happy laugh.