

ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Late one summer Sunday afternoon my brother Danny borrowed the keys to Dad's baby blue Chevy pickup and asked if I'd like to come along for a drive. I was eight and he was eighteen, and going for a ride sounded good. We jumped in the truck, slammed the big doors, and headed off together.

We shared a room until he went off to grad school at the University of Illinois, so we got to know each other pretty well. Along the way he took time to show me a few things about life. One summer, Danny and his friend Spencer took me to the Ruston Drive-In to see *The Guns of Navarone*. It was the first time I'd been to the drive-in or seen any movie on a big screen. I guess he thought a war movie would be a good one to start me off with.

Fortunately, I had Danny and an older sister, Louise, to show me the ropes. To hear them tell about those years now, it's a wonder I encountered any difficulties at all growing up. One thing's for sure; they broke our parents in well. By the time little sister Jane and I came along, our parents knew the best way to raise kids was to guide 'em gently, teach 'em to be safe, and let 'em figure it out for themselves.

But that's not what this story's about. It's about choices we make along the thorny path of life, those little decisions that sometimes alter the course of our destinies. Some say it's better to take the road less traveled.

In those days kids could qualify for a driver's license at the ripe old age of fifteen. Apparently, lawmakers figured if you could reach the pedals and see over the dashboard simultaneously, you were good to go. I went a lot of places on my bike but was already looking forward to the time when I too could drive. Where we lived in north Louisiana was mostly rolling hills covered with pine forests, so driving on the narrow roads was as close to actual fun as you could have with your seat belt on. You couldn't see very far ahead on the country roads 'cause of the blind turns and tall trees and the up and down of it all. But that was okay, because if you'd been down that road before you could count on it being where you left it.

To get maximum pleasure on our drive, we rolled the windows down and opened the vent windows wide. To make sure we stayed extra comfortable in the intense summer heat, we opened the floor vents too. This accentuated the sensation of speed and freedom, which is, of course, what driving is all about.

We headed out on Barnett Springs Road on a series of hills and valleys that felt like a roller coaster ride and had a splendid time driving around for twenty-five cents a gallon. I was snug up to the passenger door, feelin' mighty proud of my big brother with both hands on the steering wheel, driving as confidently and safely as Dad. Danny drove us out to Mitcham's Peach Orchard where Dad went dove hunting in August and September and farther out to Fowler's where Danny had caught some good sized bass in the small ponds. After we'd explored west of town, we headed back and drove through Louisiana Tech, the college where our father taught in the math department.

After driving around the college a bit, we headed north through downtown Ruston. It was quiet and all the stores were closed since it was Sunday. The town was named for Robert Edwin Russ, the Lincoln Parish * Sheriff in the 1870s, who donated 640 acres that came to be called Russ town and then eventually Ruston.

The year was 1960 and the national system of interstate roads was under construction. The engineers had decided that Interstate 20 going east to Mississippi and west to Texas would come right through our town, which at the time had a population of about 14,000, not counting the Tech

students. I hadn't stopped to contemplate the incredible impact these new, high-speed roads would have on the nation's transportation system, and I'd never heard the term suburbanization. However, I was painfully aware that Jeanette, the prettiest girl in my class and the one I was sure I'd wed someday, had to move 'cause the highway people bought their house and bull-dozed it right over to make room for the new super-highway.

They'd been building the new roadway for several years and by all appearances it was now finished, but for unknown reasons it hadn't opened. The big wide entry and exit ramps were just sittin' there begging to be used. From the overpass, for as far as I could see east and west, were two beautiful, doublewide lanes of white concrete. They even had the stripes painted and everything. Danny looked over at me and I looked back. Without a word we agreed. *Let's check it out!*

Danny slipped the truck around the barrier fencing with the words **ROAD CLOSED** painted in big black letters, and eased on down the ramp heading west toward Arcadia where my grandmother, Mama Lou, lived. We were treated to the smoothest riding road I'd ever experienced in my many years of riding. We picked up speed gradually, the only way you could pick up speed with the straight six-cylinder engine. It was certainly no dragster, but very dependable, just like Danny. He was a safe driver and an all-around good guy. *I'm lucky he's my brother.*

Soon we were moving along fairly well and the wind was blowin' in the windows and I noticed we passed right through the place where Jeanette's neighborhood used to be. The hill where her house had been was completely gone! For a minute I thought about our walks together after school and the times we touched and held hands in the bushes where no one could see us.

The Chevy was getting on up there by now and the stripes on the road were flickering almost as fast as the movie at the drive-in. We were all the way up to fifty or maybe sixty miles an hour, which is darn fast for an eight-year old without his mother. I can't say enough about the new Interstate. Our ride was so smooth and steady I could've set a glass of water on the shiny blue vinyl seat and not spilled a drop. It was way smoother than Highway 80, the road to Mama Lou's.

"How'd they make it this smooth?" I yelled, but Danny couldn't hear me and he was concentrating on looking ahead because the late afternoon sunshine was in our faces. Underneath the sound of the wind blowing in the cab, I felt the strong, uninterrupted purr of the engine, burning ethyl to perfection, propelling us along the road never traveled.

Suddenly, the truck began shaking up and down furiously and the constant sounds of our perfect journey were replaced by the most awful hammering noise I'd ever heard. My body jerked hard against the seat belt, my teeth rattled, and my skinny arms flopped up and down. Dad's truck bounced up and down furiously and I couldn't imagine what had gone wrong. The racket reminded me of the machine gun fire in *The Guns of Navarone*. I watched as Danny held the steering wheel steady, put on the brakes, and gradually brought the truck to a halt, right there in the middle of the brand-new, deserted, four-lane divided highway. We had, quite abruptly, reached the end of the pavement just over the top of a hill. We were stopped on a mat of interlacing steel reinforcing rods they put down before they pour the concrete. A second after we came to a halt, the cloud of dust we'd kicked up filled the cab and we coughed up a storm.

After taking a few moments to calm ourselves, we got out and looked underneath the truck to see if any tires were flat or if the suspension had been damaged. To our surprise and delight everything was okay, as far as we could tell. We decided we'd better go back home before anything else bad happened. And we agreed right off that we'd not tell Dad the details of our adventure.



It's been quite a few years since that unforgettable summer drive, but now I know what I learned. Taking the road less traveled can make life more interesting and it's definitely less crowded. On the other hand, taking the road never traveled may not be a good idea at all.

* For readers in the other forty-nine states who may not know, in Louisiana, Parish is the equivalent of County.