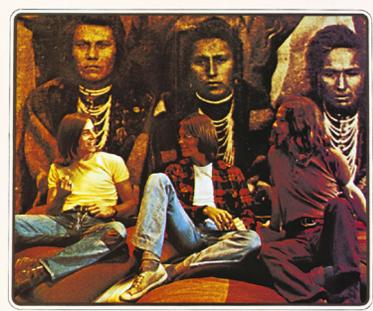


AMERICA



America

"A Horse with No Name"

America

12/1971

Warner Bros.

Georgia to Oregon

Shelley Sweeney

If I didn't *have* to go, no way would I have gone. I loved my school and had way too many friends in Georgia to ever leave them behind. Besides, nobody in his or her right mind would *willingly* make a trip from Georgia to Oregon in a Ford, in June 1969. Even if our vehicle had been a Lincoln Town Car with a private chauffeur and only me, still...no way.

Three thousand miles is a long drive. And that wasn't the worst of it. We were travelling 3,000 miles in the middle of summer in a '68 Ford station wagon that had no air conditioning, and no working radio. On board were two teenagers (one hippy brother, one nerd sister), a Persian cat, an 8-year-old girl (me), a mother and father with jittery interaction, and a 1200 lb. horse in a trailer behind the Ford. No, my parents weren't rich. No, they never rose to rich. Yes, a horse moved all the way from Georgia to Oregon with us.

Before we crossed the Georgia-Tennessee line I decided it'd be best if I changed my name before we got to Oregon. A fresh start with a new name was the only way I could think of to end sadness of leaving our split-story contemporary home; my cozy bedroom; a big backyard with a homemade wooden swing; woods, trees, lizards, plants, rocks, and things—*everything* I loved—especially my friends.

The horse trailer that the horse rode in wasn't larger than normal. But even so it caused the Ford's back bumper to barely ride off the concrete. Luggage, five people, a cat, and 1200 pounds of equine meant Ford had to give it all she had, which wasn't much. The bumper scraped and screamed over harmless turns and grooves. Sometimes the jolts were so alarming and slowed us down so often, I guessed it would have been easier and faster to just ride the horse to Oregon.

Our days on the road were filled with hours of window gazing at America. Plants, trees, mountains, birds, debris, rocks and everything in between could be seen all day long, and then seen again the following day. I discovered the same things that were in Georgia were in all the other states too, only different.

Hour after hour, day in and day out, four wheels rolled us forward with stops only for gas, lunch and toilet breaks. Around six p.m. every day, Dad would spy a Holiday or Ramada Inn to call our home for the night. But, not before he knocked on doors of homes that had barns and pastures behind them asking if our horse could spend the night. "We'll get him out of here first thing in the morning," Dad assured the landowners.

Our horse had a nice name. But, since I was changing my name I figured he should have a new name too, at least by the time we arrived in Oregon. I didn't tell anyone else in the car about the importance of new names for us. They might not have understood.

As we moved further west, the scenery changed to wildlife, antelope, mountain goats, hawks, eagles, steep mountains, and huge rocks. Just when we had adjusted to the new background it changed again. Everything turned flat, vast, aired and deserted. Sand, cacti, tumbleweed, rolling hills, ranges, and provinces were as far as our eyes could see. It looked like a geography picture book of the United States and it was all right before our eyes at 50 miles-per-hour in a two-car train, with a middle-class menagerie on board.

Rolling through the desert with no air conditioning meant the windows were cracked. A thundering noise whooshed through the cabin reminding everyone that the radio didn't

work. Mr. Fly flew in every day and hung out near the cat. He buzzed madly going nowhere in annoying intervals. The cat paid him no attention even when he landed on her fur. I came to like Mr. Fly's buzzing. Listening to Mr. Fly was good company, especially when I felt guilty for not telling everyone about the new names the horse and I would soon have.

I missed my friends the whole trip, but I especially missed them when we drove through the large, lonely desert around Idaho and Utah. I wrote postcards to them with photos of cities and mountains that we'd passed through. Dad mailed the postcards from the motel reception desk, with \$.03 stamps.

I told my friends about how tired the horse was from standing up all day behind our car. I referred to him by his real name and signed my real name on the cards. I didn't tell my friends that the two of us would have new, fancier, names when we got to Oregon. I didn't tell them that our new names would be a disguise for how sad we were about leaving our friends in Georgia.

It was discouraging that by the time we made it to the middle of Idaho I still hadn't come up with what our new names would be. Oregon was getting closer and closer. I needed help. So, I broke down and told my family about my plan. I didn't tell them *why* I was changing our names because I didn't want them to know how sad we were. Instead, I made it sound like it'd be fun, happy and exciting to have new names. I explained to them that if the horse and I had new names by the time we arrived in Oregon, great things would happen for all of us. *We'd all be happy.* But, everyone ignored me. No one suggested a single, new name for either of us.

I kept searching. *Maybe: Linda, Kristin, Tammy, Vicki.*

Strangely, I couldn't come up with a single, new name for the horse. He was big and beautiful. He had three white socks and one black sock, a long white blaze ran zig-zag down the center of his head, turning right near his muzzle. His coat was blood-bay, a reddish brown. He had long, thick, black mane, tail, and forelock. Deep down I loved his name: Sam. Sometimes I cried when I thought about changing it. I cried about changing my name too. Nobody in the car knew when I was crying. If I didn't think about my friends, or changing our names, I never cried.

We could see forever in the desert, all the way to a far, far away horizon line. Brown and gray hues of emptiness were everywhere. Sometimes I pretended to have a bird's eye view. I'd giggle thinking about what our station wagon must have looked like pulling a horse trailer through a boring, brownish-gray desert where no one else was anywhere in sight. My family didn't ask me what I was giggling about and I decided not to tell them.

Maybe it's better to not have friends, so you don't miss them so much.

I wished that my mother had fixed the radio. She didn't fix it because she didn't want to listen to hippy brother and nerd sister argue about what station to put it on. She didn't want to do her job, at least not until we got to Oregon.

My sister would leverage herself on the dashboard with her face beaming toward the sun. Her butt stuck up in the air facing toward me in the back seat. She wanted to have a suntan by the time we arrived in Oregon. What she got was sun burned. She was o.k. with a sunburn though -- anything but white, white skin.

When we were some where just past the desert...well, I blocked most of it out because it was too upsetting. What I remember is that Dad wanted to dunk the cat, inside her cage, in the Snake River to clean her off. It was burning hot outside, but my body froze

listening to everyone argue. Fluffy was such a good girl. She never did anything wrong. She would've been fine staying back in Georgia with a neighbor or even at the humane society with homeless cats. The Snake River was mean. At least it sounded mean. Poor Fluffy—snakes and a cold, rushing, mean river meant she would die and be eaten. I screamed on behalf of Fluffy.

Sam was getting tired of standing for long days in a trailer, the cat was inappropriately blamed for things, the teenagers were being teenagers, my parents weren't getting along, and I still hadn't come up with my and Sam's new names. The last eight hundred miles irked and agitated everyone inside the Ford.

Oregon was beautiful and big. It took us nine days to get inside the borders. There were ski mountains in one corner and a desert with Jackrabbits everywhere in another corner. I noticed that the trees in Oregon were a lot taller than the trees in Georgia, and that the open spaces were much bigger. One of the first things we all noticed was that the people in Oregon were nice, just like in Georgia.

There were lots of new horse friends for Sam at his new boarding barn. He seemed pleased to no longer load into a trailer and stand for eight-hour days. Fluffy settled in too. But sadly, a car struck her not long after we moved in. When our grief passed, we got two new cats that were never allowed outside.

Our new home was a small city with an ocean close by. Driving to the ocean was a lot easier than the six-hour drive to an ocean at our old home in Georgia. But, like our southern home, our new home's heart lay in the ground underneath the concrete. I thought maybe that Oregon's deep-down underground heart was bigger than Georgia's. Oregonians really did love the ground and trees. People called them *tree huggers*. And, litterbugs are shamed in Oregon. If you litter in Oregon no one likes you.

Finding out that Georgia and Oregon both had aboveground, man-made disguises over what lived underneath them was fun. Just like how a name disguises what is deep down inside a person's heart. Human hearts hide behind names the way the earth's heart hides under concrete. People's names are *heart disguises* and big, strong, steal buildings are *earth-heart disguises*.

Making new friends wasn't as scary as I thought it'd be. There were lots of nice kids, good friends, caring friends...like my old friends in Georgia, only different. I was relieved that I didn't have to change my name after all. Sam ended up not needing a new name either. And, even though I made new friends in Oregon I still missed my old friends. Sometimes I cried when I thought about them, even after a month passed.

The whole family settled into our new home as who we'd been all along on the inside, deep down. Most of the pain of moving across the United States of America went away over time. We all had new friends and old friends. Sam and I were okay. Everyone was okay. But, the earth stayed deeply disguised under the steal and concrete. It would take much, much more time to tell if it would be okay.