

Riding the rails instead of the air

Life is Good

Rita Speer



About a week ago, my husband and I returned home from a wonderful vacation. We rode the train to southern California to visit friends and family. Several years ago we had a very negative encounter with a TSA employee and decided not to fly anymore. Bob has wanted to take a train trip for years, so this year we combined his desire with our plans for a vacation.

We got on the train at Dodge City and disembarked at Victorville, California. The hours of arrival were (very) early morning times. We missed sleep, but a cab was waiting in Victorville, and we slept soundly for several hours after checking into a motel. The purpose of the stop in Victorville was to visit a cousin whom I had not seen in 25 years. The next morning we went from Victorville into Los Angeles and then on the Camarillo to visit friends.

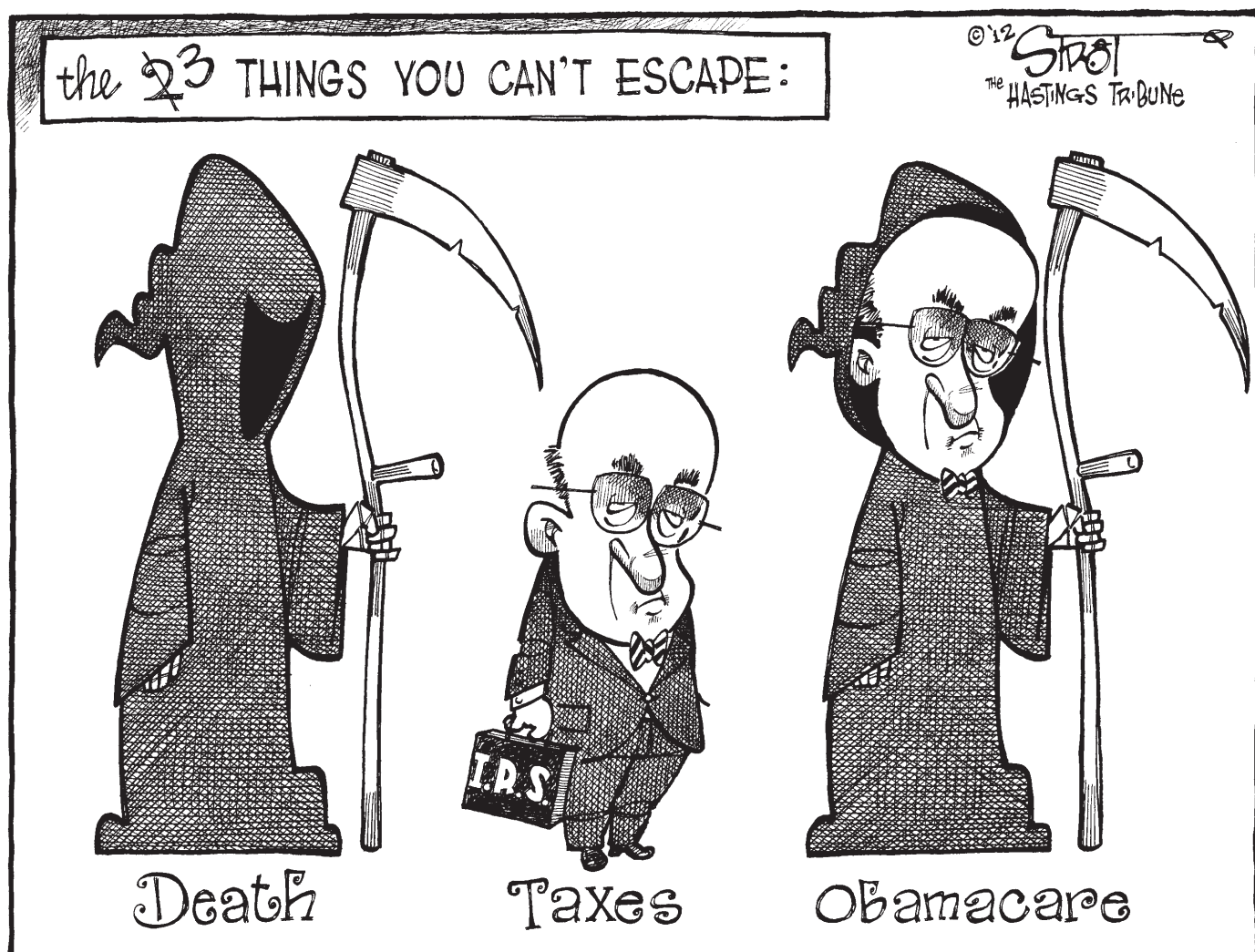
We had reserved coach seats from Dodge City to L.A. The train we took to Camarillo and then, two days later to San Diego, was more of a commuter train, and our seats were "unreserved." As long as a passenger had a ticket for a given day, (s) he could ride either north or south on any of the trains to make that journey. They asked young and able-bodied people to climb the stairs and sit on the upper level. We were fortunate to "qualify" to stay on the lower level. People got on with suitcases, no baggage, only electronic devices, while some brought their bicycles aboard.

Coming home we had a sleeping room. This meant that we had a small room with a tiny, self-contained full bathroom and seats that made out into beds. The car steward made the seats into beds while we were having supper. He treated us graciously and brought our bags to the room and then took them to the area where we would get off. It was easy to go to sleep with the gentle movement of the train, and the sound of wheels on the rails was soothing. While we were at breakfast in the morning, our steward made up the beds so we had plenty of leg room during the day and evening. He stayed up to make sure we got off at our destination and didn't sleep through it.

We have only good things to say about our experience on the train. The seats are wider than the ones on planes, there are no seatbelts, the aisles are wide enough for two people to pass, and it's easy to move about. It is uncomplicated to move from car to car, so we spent time in the observation car and dining car.

We met fascinating people who were willing to converse with strangers. Both Bob and I enjoy "people-watching," so we had a great time observing a number of people. There were people we considered crazy and some who were completely self-absorbed. But most were willing to engage in conversations, and we came away with new ideas and information.

I would highly recommend a train trip to someone who is looking for a more relaxed way to travel. We didn't experience any of the hassles associated with flying, and people were generally interested and interesting.



A weekend get away to the mountains

Wait a minute. Let me get down on my knees and kiss the ground. I am so glad to be back on terra firma.

We spent a few days in a mountain cabin in Colorado and did not see a straight piece of highway the entire time. Jim looked at the twisty, turny roads as a challenge; I looked at them in sheer terror. He thought they were a test of his driving skills; I thought they were devised by the devil, himself.

To my husband's credit, he drove as slowly as possible to allay my fears. It didn't really help much, but he tried. Don't get me wrong, I love the mountains. Once I'm there. It's just the trip to get there I can't handle.

We rented a friend's cabin in a quaint, little mountain town not far from one of the hot spot ski resorts. The cabin was rustic to say the least, but it had most amenities like electricity and running water.

No stove, but I came prepared with a griddle big enough to cook hash browns, toast and eggs on: all at once. One night I even prepared roasting ears in a foil pouch. Best corn on the cob I've ever fixed or maybe it was just the

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



mountain air.

-ob-

This mini-vacation was a trip down Memory Lane for Jim. Remember when I told you that I had showed him how to search for people on the Internet and he had found several old friends. Well this trip was a reunion tour of sorts. We visited old union carpenter friends of his and others he had worked with in the Boy Scouts organization.

Days of the union (in that area, at least) are over and none of them make their living as carpenters. One teaches trade skills at an alternative high school; one is retiring from his job as a program analyst at a power plant; another works as a handyman on a large family-owned ranch; another made and lost a small fortune; and another was

forced into early retirement by health conditions.

Even though I didn't know any of these men before, they welcomed me and I enjoyed listening to all their tales of "remember when." Jim had not seen his friends in more than 25 years so some of their memories may have been magnified, but it was wonderful to see their bonds of friendship had lasted.

What was equally heartwarming was that, to a man, every one of them told Jim how important he had been in their life. They said they had perceived "something" in him that set him apart and they admired not only his leadership (Jim was a crew foreman and president of the local union), but his craftsmanship and integrity. And, like Jim, they weren't ashamed to shed a tear when we parted company.

-ob

Friends had taken care of my flowers and garden while we were away.

The glads are blooming; so are the tiger lillies; and the tomato vines are loaded. It was perfect timing to come home.

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Memories of the summertime moth brigade

It seems like only yesterday when I raced my buddies down the red-carpeted ramp of the Pix Theater in Hoxie trying to nail down those good seats. You know the ones I'm talking about - those in the front row where tennis shoes could be heard latching into congealed soda from the earlier matinee.

Back in those days, "the guys and me" could watch Davey Crockett, Old Yeller or It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World for only a quarter and a seal from a milk carton produced at Ada's, our hometown dairy.

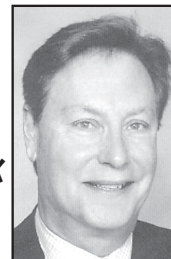
Outside as we waited in line for our tickets, you could smell the popcorn and glimpse the soda machine as it dropped a cup from its innards and spewed forth an overly sweet combination of syrup, carbonated water and ice. Sometimes the cup turned sideways and the liquid missed and sprayed the hand of the kid expecting a tasty treat.

Mom didn't keep chocolate at home so going to the movies meant we splurged. I couldn't wait to eat my favorite candy - a Denver Sandwich. This bit of heaven consisted of two long strawberry wafer cookies with oodles of caramel and peanut bits wrapped in a thick coating of milk chocolate. It only cost 5 cents and as I recall it was almost as big as an ice cream sandwich.

Other movies I loved were westerns starring Gary Cooper, Roy Rogers and my favorite, Randolph Scott. When

Insight

John Schlageck



I was five years old, I saw my first horror movie - The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms.

This movie premiered in the early '50s and, like so many of the other films of this period, featured a nuclear explosion that freed a frozen dinosaur from his icy tomb. This armored giant reaped his prehistoric fury on modern man and my young psyche. I suffered nightmares for weeks.

When we grew a bit older we drove nearly 80 miles to Hays to attend a larger theater. This theater overwhelmed our tiny one aisle venue and featured a beautiful balcony. Being the older kids now, we always sat upstairs where we could hold hands and carefully put our arms around our girlfriends.

The point of all this, I guess, is they don't make movie theaters like they used to. The multi-screened mazes and cinema complexes that thrive today are designed for volume and efficiency. Forget cozy, close and jam packed. This only happens occasionally when a blockbuster is released and lasts for usually the first day.

And sneaking into one of these new

theaters in our high security world is also a thing of the past, not that I ever tried such a prank as a youngster.

I have nothing against these modern, chain theaters of today. I guess it is just good business in this age of DVDs, palm-entertainment systems and satellite television. They have to compete and who doesn't like to watch some of the latest Hollywood offerings on the giant screen?

Still, whenever I travel in rural communities across Kansas, I keep an eye out for the little movie houses that may have survived in small towns. I can name a few on one hand.

Owners of such small operations lament the price to be paid for keeping up with new technology, the fewer number of movie-goers in their shrinking communities, the long wait for new releases like Harry Potter or parts for their old, tired projectors.

Several have managed to hang on, and their battered neon lights still attract the summertime moth brigade and sweaty-handed kids on first dates.

Most of these operators have outside jobs. They cannot make it by running a theater in a rural community alone.

One operator I ran across several years ago in south-central Kansas told me he runs a small printing operation and dons the robes of a municipal judge.

"I keep the theater open," he said, "to keep the kids out of my courtroom."

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