

Relaxed dad glad he left driving to them

By Dean Nelson

July 7, 1996

My friends' reactions were identical. They waited several seconds without speaking, waiting for me to say, "April Fool," or "NOT!"

When they saw that I wasn't joking about taking my family on a Greyhound bus to North Dakota for our summer vacation, their expectant faces generally fell to troubled frowns. Then they mumbled a barely audible, "Why?"

The answer to my friends' question was simple.

The bus is cheap.

We knew we needed to get from San Diego to Valley City, N.D., for a family reunion. More than 100 people from around the country were convening at the family farm, and more than a year ago we had promised we'd be there, too.

My Volvo station wagon had 219,834 miles on it. I didn't want to take the chance of getting stranded in Ogallala, Neb., where Swedish cars might be a novelty. There were no airfare wars at the time, and train tickets cost as much as the airfare.

To ride Greyhound, my wife and I paid \$178 each, round trip; we paid \$138 each for tickets for our two children. (This year the family could travel even cheaper because children pay half the adult fare.) It was a 48-hour trip -- each way. But from a cash perspective, it was no contest. We had more time than money.

But would the kids go for it?

We'd seen our 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter go stir crazy before. Long flights with them took constant attention, and my wife and I didn't relax for a moment. What would they be like for 48 hours of round-the-clock highway?

They loved it. They could move around, play, nap, and so could we. Within the first few minutes, they proclaimed, "Cool! No seat belts!"

Our fellow travelers were mostly friendly, and most practiced good hygiene. Among us were other families, international travelers, students and retirees.

I figured that what we all had in common was that we couldn't afford to fly. But I discovered something else:

"I simply don't like to fly," said a San Diego psychiatrist en route to his own family's reunion in Minnesota. "This is one of the few chances I get to just sit and read."

A woman who had been visiting family in California told me that there was no other way to get to her hometown of Rifle, Colo. "It's not that I can't afford to fly," she said. "The bus is the only way into small towns."

A family of four was busing from one coast to the other because it had missed a connecting flight after arriving back in the United States from a vacation overseas. The cost of adding of four more plane fares to their vacation budget was too high.

"We feel as if we're seeing America for the first time," the dad told me. He was surprisingly cheerful.

Station breaks

When we told my cousins from Sweden about our adventure, they were intrigued. During visits to the United States, they'd rented a car and seen much of the country -- but had never considered taking the bus.

"The bus sounds like our Eurail pass in concept," said cousin John Lundquist. "But we hear in Sweden that the buses aren't very modern, they stop in every small town, and they carry a lower class of people."

It's true that Greyhound buses are not very modern, compared to tour buses in the United States and in Europe. And the bus stations are even less modern than the buses. Station bathrooms are, well, awful.

Greyhounds don't stop in every small town, but they do stop every couple of hours.

Many of the depots aren't really depots. They're Greyhound signs attached to minimarts, gas stations or restaurants. In Lexington, Neb., the depot is a sign posted just around the corner from the Jesus is Lord Windshield Repair Shop.

The Davenport depot in Iowa is the prettiest -- across the street from the Mississippi River. Grand Junction, Colo.'s station is across the street from a well-kept city park. North Platte, Neb., has shelves of used books for sale with titles such as "Vanna Speaks" and "Guide to Arc Welding."

The Barstow station in California, which also serves as the train depot, looks like a prop from a Hope-Crosby movie. The Las Vegas station is less attractive -- more like a large waiting room at a Sears Auto Service Center. Across the street, though, was a casino that advertised, "Win a Car -- 10-Cents a Throw." I didn't see any of the passengers pooling their dimes.

Predictably, stations in Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago and Minneapolis are not quite so quaint. They are in older, more industrial sections of downtown, and we were not tempted to go exploring nearby.

Roadshow

In the towns where we did go exploring, we met Americans much like our mode of transportation -- perhaps a little out of date and in no hurry. They had time to talk with those passing through. One told me of his own spiritual odyssey of traveling across the country on the bus to visit the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City.

The local merchants had mixed feelings about our arrival into their small towns. They knew we were good for their bottom line, but they seemed overwhelmed by our numbers.

I asked one cashier if her restaurant hadn't expected us.

"We knew you was coming," she said. "You always come at this time of night -- you're the only reason we're still awake."

Strange, I thought. Then why were they out of everything?

As for my cousin's statement about the lower class of people aboard buses in this country: There may be more Kmart shoppers on board than those who buy at Nordstrom, but it's not that much different from the economy class on a plane. However, I saw no one using a laptop computer or cellular phone during any part of our trip. And I have never seen an airline traveler keep his snuffbox in a leather snuffbox holster attached to his belt -- which I saw on a bus traveler in Colorado.

I drove my family across the country six years ago when the Volvo had considerably fewer miles on it. The car overheated several times, I got too many speeding tickets trying to make up for the boiling time on the shoulder and I suffered a four-day migraine.

On the bus, all of that was somebody else's problem.

On all other trips we had taken, the "vacation" began after we arrived at our destination. This time, once we saw how excited our kids were on the bus, and that all we had to do was look out the window, our vacation began well before we were out of San Diego County.

By the time we entered Utah, the real beauty set in. Deepening purple, yellow, orange and red skies seemed to enlarge mountains and canyons to fairy-tale proportions. Then, as the last of the light dimmed, distant lightning showed its hard edges, slashing this way, then that, sometimes in several directions at once. The mountains were more than a habitat for wildlife -- they were an entirely different universe of size and color.

After riding through Nebraska and the Dakotas, my daughter proclaimed that she had "always" wanted to live on a farm and that her mother and I wouldn't let her.

Bus buddies

On planes, passengers act as if they are in isolated pods that repel interaction. But a camaraderie develops among passengers who share the same bus for more than a few hours. If it got too chilly at night, people spread their blankets across aisles to other travelers. Headphones, CDs and tapes were passed around. Coloring books and toys made it from one child to another. One older gentleman offered me his half-finished soda in a cup with his chewed-on straw (I politely declined).

Even the drivers invited dialogue. If the bus got too hot or cold, or if several passengers were smokers and wanted a quick break outside the bus, the drivers obliged. They carried on pleasant conversations with the front few rows about scenery, weather, truckers and their families.

Most drivers had that annoying school-bus authority complex, though. Their opening remarks, "This a no-smoking bus," and "Headsets must be used with all radios and tape players," were said in such accusing tones that I wondered if their last jobs were with the California Youth Authority.

It was impressive to watch an experienced bus driver weave in and out of fast-moving traffic, like a proficient skier moving among those who are on the slopes for occasional recreation.

But there was one driver who should've been confined to the bunny slope. Through the mountains of Colorado, she took the curves that parallel the Colorado River the way a teen-age driver handles a van for the first time. The word "careen" kept surfacing in my mind as I braced first my right shoulder, then my left. At a rest stop in Eagle, Colo. that she asked the passengers to help her find, she confessed that she had been on the job for six months and wasn't very comfortable.

And I'll never forgive the driver who left several of us at a tiny rest stop near Castle Dale, Utah, because we exceeded his five-minute limit. He drove off -- and we panicked, shouting and waving, chasing the bus down

the road. Finally, he circled back to pick us up.

"You're lucky it was me drivin', and I haven't used up my kindness today," he said as my seething wife pulled our kids on board. "A lot of drivers would have just left you."

"We paid your wage," my accountant spouse hissed. "You wait."

He chose not to invite any more dialogue.

Shifting gears

We got off the bus in Grand Island, Neb., a state my son declared "prettier than California." It was a chance to visit with several relatives before the reunion. The visit was so successful, we decided to visit more relatives in Minneapolis and Chicago after the reunion.

Eventually, we traveled through portions of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa.

The biggest problem we had was with food. Meal stops aboard Greyhounds are not tied to traditional eating times because there is often no place nearby during those hours. We had "meal stops" at 10:30 p.m. at the El Bambi Cafe in Beaver, Utah -- a dreadful restaurant with irritable food servers; another at 4:30 a.m. in Grand Junction.

Meal times were especially difficult for those of us with kids. They'll eat bagels, raisins, apples and crackers for only so long. The pistachios didn't even last through California.

Sleeping, however, was seldom a problem. An unspoken lights-out rule went into effect around 10 p.m. each night. Sleep usually came easily -- in part because the seats are bigger than coach seats on airplanes, and travelers have more room to stretch out.

The wonderful thing about riding a bus across the country: You get permission to slow your life down. You get to decide when you'll take in the scenery, when you'll read a book and when you'll take a nap.

It means you get to look your companion in the eye when you talk -- something that makes my wife nervous when I'm driving.

When our trip began, I felt like an 18-wheeler heading down a hill, shifting into lower and lower gears, lurching, forcing myself to slow down. At first I resisted, but once I found the right gear, I settled in for the leisurely ride. It eventually felt great to travel that way -- something I have never said about airplane travel.

When we returned to San Diego, friends knowingly arched their eyebrows and asked if I had learned my lesson. I only smiled.

Next time, I would plan food better, travel lighter, stretch my back and legs more during the stops, take a basketball to shoot at some neighborhood hoops near the bus stops, and maybe plan to stop overnight in a few more small towns.

And I would never, ever, exceed the five-minute rest-stop limit.

If you go: Bus traveling

GETTING THERE: The Greyhound Lines station is at First and Broadway in downtown San Diego.

COSTS: Greyhound Lines bus travel from San Diego to anywhere in the United States costs no more than \$89 each way with a 14-day advance purchase. Travelers over 55 get a 10 percent discount; children 2-11 pay half price. Kids under 2 travel free. For more information or reservations, ask your travel agent or phone (800) 231-2222.

TIPS: No matter where passengers are heading, they almost always have choices to make about routes and times. Study options and decide when and where you stop or change buses.

Pack your own food. Meal stops serve the drivers' schedules, not the passengers'.

Take a blanket or heavier clothes for the night. It gets cold.

Keep a travel journal; urge your children to keep one, too.

Let children pack their own carry-on bag of toys, games and books. Our kids brought action toys, paper dolls, coloring books and lots of paper to draw on. They played hand-held video games. (It was important that the games had a button for turning off the sound.) We also brought cassette players with headsets and lots of stories on tape.

Caption: 1 DRAWING 1 PIC 1 CHART

2. Road trip: The Nelsons (from left), Dean, Vanessa, Blake and Marcia, pose at a stop in Nebraska. The family quickly adjusted to the bus' slower pace. (F-6) 3. If you go: Bus traveling (F-7) 1. TUKO FUJISAKI 3. Dean Nelson

Memo: For chart, see end of text.

■ Nelson teaches journalism at Point Loma Nazarene College. His most recent book is the "New Father's Survival Guide," published by Augsburg/Fortress.