

The Ledger

Jerry Woodfill

Columbus had one as did Charles Lindbergh, Neil Armstrong, and my father - a trip-traveling log book, a ledger, the thing for recording momentous events in the exploration of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial journeys. No doubt those navigators of ocean, air and space kept theirs, as Dad kept his, to judge whether food stuffs, fuel, and other life sustaining consumables would last the voyage. And so Dad launched our Colorado vacation sojourn with these categories - "Day 1, Odometer Mileage - 35,301, Cost of Meals - (_____), Cost of Lodging - (_____), Fuel Cost (_____), Miscellaneous (_____)"

Now Queen Isabella's limits on Columbus's spending could not have been more rigid than ours. This two thousand mile, ten day voyage, could not exceed \$400 in totality, i.e., motel fees, hamburger stops, cavern admissions, gas allowances, and that ominous *miscellaneous* category, the bane of the "best laid plans of stingy vacation budgeters."

The first skirmish came a scant two miles from home port. It was a stop for suntan lotion at the Ken Ridge Drugs which precipitated the event. I asked Mom to buy me clip on sun-glasses to cover my Buddy Holly massive black plastic frames. Dad said, "No, it wasn't planned." Mom countered with her weapon, *the look*, the weapon every husband has no defense for, unless, we wanted to return to port and start over tomorrow. I walked out with my eyes shaded. Dad's log had taken a \$3.00 hit in the miscellaneous category. (It was dutifully entered along with the tanning cream.)

By the time we'll driven Kennedy Avenue for the launch west on the Tri-State, Dad's composure returned. Our *Mobile Travel Guide* (Western States edition) promised to lead us in the paths of economic righteousness, i.e., sights, restaurants, and sleeping accommodations worthy of a Brantwoodian's vacation. Dad's confidence returned when I told him the guide listed prices for every category with dollar signs (one "\$" sign for cheap to five "\$\$\$\$\$" signs for lavish.) as well as actual cost. Surely, his \$400 would be preserved with such wise counsel.

Mobile's vacation planners served us well through the plains of Iowa and Nebraska. Holiday Inns were always avoided in favor of Best of Westerns so that lodging and meals were not a threat. However, the attrition of miscellaneous was proving aggravating, a stop at the Amana Colonies including a meal of colony cooking, a visit to a western desperado's museum of artifacts (fare for three adults and child, my sister), and some predictable purchases of souvenirs at each stop - all recorded at the point of expenditure by my father. Once, he held up a

long line of people waiting to enter a museum while he paused to erase an entry made in the wrong column of his ledger.

Worst of all, as each day's total would approach the \$40 limit, he'd steer our pick of restaurant and lodging judiciously. At 5:00 PM, he'd have me studying the guide book, calling out costs of every restaurant and motel within an hour's drive. We'd only stop when his mental calculator locked onto the cheapest and often the most primitive lodging. This was also true for restaurant choices. The "blue-plate" special had to be suitable to that day's meals' allowance.

Somewhere between the Nebraska-Colorado state line and Boulder, Colorado, Mom had her fill of the Chancellor of the Woodfill family Exchequer.

"J.R. we are going to eat at the Mountain Lodge near Boulder." (Having studied the Guide, I'd quietly murmured to Mom that it had a four dollar sign rating but excellent steaks, pure-bred Colorado beef.)

Dad screwed up his lip the way he always did when he didn't agree with you, but he said nothing.

"Did you hear me, J.R.?" His response, only ten DB above a whisper was, "O.K. If you insist."

The Mountain Lodge must have consumed every knotty pine board produced in that part of Colorado for weeks. The floor was knotty pine, the walls, the chairs, the table, the porch, the steps, the step railing, the sign above, even the toilet seats, not to mention the plates and the printed menu which had a knotty pine design.

"Put away your ledger," Mom said. "This is one meal I'm going to enjoy." While Mom and I ordered a steak, Dad picked a hamburger. Susan got the kid's burger. The waitress brought forth this meal of Colorado's finest *steerage*. Actually, of the meals, I'd preferred Dad's. My steak was so sinewy and gristly that swallowing the swill made me gag on each bite.

"Mom, I can't eat it."

This launched another of those surprise encounters, not unlike an Indian ambush, sudden and unexpected.

"J.R., the boy can't eat his steak. Send it back."

If there was one thing my father abhorred, it was showing displeasure with a waitress, purchased item, or service. I'm, to this day, at a loss to understand his inability to confront a wrong, except that this weakness has been passed on to me as a genetic flaw. It has to be a deep-seated lack of confidence, a desire to be liked by all.

Rather than place blame on the source, he and I shift it to the innocent.

"Helen, the steak's fine. It's Jerry's fault. He's cutting it incorrectly."

Now to this day, I don't understand how cutting has anything to

do with the quality of a steak. It's either grisly or not. "What's the way you cut it got to do with it?"

"J.R. that's ridiculous!" I agreed.

"No it isn't Helen...if he cuts the meat with the grain, it'll be tender."

I thought about that from my experience making a wood shoeshine box in shop. If I cross-cut the pine with a hand saw, it went slower than cutting lengthwise along the grain. Maybe Dad was right?

"Alright, Dad, I'll try it your way."

The serrated steak knife seemed to like Dad's suggestion until it struck a bright white elastic run of disgusting gristle and sinew so tough that I couldn't have sliced through it with a band saw or wire cutter.

"Here, Dad...you try it."

Dad tried, Mom tried, I tried a second time.

The bottom line was in the finality of Mom's assessment...

"J.R., send the damn thing back!"

Worst than choking on that tough prairie steer's flesh was my father's gasp when presented the bill. The meal had eaten our lodging allowance for the night. Even the Mobile Guide could not rescue us as we drove into uncharted lodging lands.

Only the peril which Columbus encountered as he approached the New World could equal what we next experienced.

"Dad, there's a motel." It wasn't listed among the Best of Westerns, Quality Courts, Econo-lodges, not even among the sole-proprietorships of the Mobile Guide. The sun was setting in the west when we pulled up to the manager's office. Whatever it was. We had no choice. It was the only motel within 50 miles.

Yet, Dad seemed pleased. I guessed because it would, in a small measure, be financial recovery from that lavish steak dinner hours before. Like the Mountain Lodge restaurant, every stick of wood down to the toothpicks in the coffee shop was knotty pine with a yellow urine-like hue. I vowed never to enter my parents' downstairs recreation room again. Its paneling was knotty pine.

Actually, it was more a cluster of cabins than a motel. Each primitive dwelling reminded me of those "shot-gun" houses seen in Gene Autry westerns. You parked your car, instead of your horse, in front of each of these western bunk houses. I'll not exaggerate or amplify on the depravity of the place except to say that it was not even fit for a vacationing Hessville steelworker, leave alone Brantwoodian gentry. Its only redeeming virtue was Dad's entry in his ledger of \$5.00 for a night's lodging, four people in a double bed. The odor from the mildewed bath towels made a shower out of the question for any of the Woodfill party.

That morning, I saw the majestic Rocky Mountains in the distance, miles away but jutting thousands of feet skyward. I must have

felt the same glow Columbus experienced seeing the first glimpse of the New World. My parents sighed in relief as well, not so much for the scenery but for the knowledge that the higher elevation would make the car's interior cooler.

Even Brantwoodians, being in the northern climes, did not often buy cars with the luxury of an air conditioner. It was not until I matriculated from Brantwood south to Texas that I enjoyed the luxury of cool driving.

All one could hope for in July and August was the jet-like blast through the front vent windows as a measure of relief. Only at speeds exceeding sixty miles per hour, came such relief. Of course, that is the speed of the winds from a tropical storm so that everything on board or rather, in board, had to be tied down as surely as Columbus lashed cargo to the deck of the *Santa Maria*. No magazine could be read without the wind flipping pages like a Las Vegas dealer shuffling a deck of Blackjack cards. Small dogs had to be chained to an arm rest lest a tongue wagging dog's head-out-the-window posture end up as a road kill victim of that wicked vent wind.

A neighbor suggested a solution for air-condition-less Brantwoodian vacationers. It was a contraption which resembled a small jet engine. I liken it to the pod-like tubular jet engines attached to either side of a DC-9. In this case, it was sort of a jet-air-conditioner. Somehow, physics prescribes a phenomena that cools air when it blows through water. Portable fans with looping tubes of water do this, but I wasn't sure it would work on a car. (The thing must work though. The store ad said, "As Seen on TV.") This was a Rube Goldberg automobile air-condition at best. We had one for our trip.

Instead of a fan motor to blow the air, that vent wind served the same purpose, providing a seventy mile per hour wind. The thing had a bracket on each end to slide onto the passenger's window. Closing the window held the unit snugly in place so that its front looked like the air inlet of a jet-fighter's intake scoop. Some kind of screen mesh within could be rotated by pulling a cord which protruded into the car. A long slot in the thing's side let outside air blow into the car through the screen mesh. (*Describing the device reminds me of my technical writing course at Rice University. I was among the last engineers to take the course. It was replaced by Fortran programming.*)

The cord reminded me of our lawnmower's starter rope in the way it rotated the mesh cylinder like the mower's flywheel. Now comes the crux of the device, that thing which is the genius of invention, the brilliant innovation which makes the \$39.95 sold on TV item (\$4.95 per month for a year sent to a P.O. Box in New Jersey) a cheap replacement for factory air, a \$1,000 car option.

This is it: At the other end of the jet-AC-car-cooler is a fitting to

attach a garden hose. This is what makes the apparatus work. The hose fills the cooler with water. I noticed the instructions listed a caution as to the amount of water needed. Like the mark on the water flask of a home coffee-maker, exceeding the level could be detrimental.

It's a four step process: Fill the car-cooler to the prescribed level with water, attach it to the window, roll the window up to lock it in place, then pull the rip cord to rotate the screen mesh through the water. The vent-air blast blows through the wet cylinder's mesh into the car. This cools the occupants. As cooling ebbs, simply pull on the cord rotating more of the mesh through the water, refreshing the wetness of the mesh and the cooling of the occupants.

Like those first attempts at launching America's rockets into orbit, difficulties arose. Near Des Moines, Iowa, it happened. I was the car-cooler operator, sitting in the co-pilot's seat adjacent to this engine of invention. Mom was the one who suggested we try out our innovative cooler.

According to instructions, I gingerly pulled the cord handle. The rotation of the cylindrical mesh seemed to be happening within as the mesh absorbed water. We had filled the reservoir with water from our garden hose prior to leaving Brantwood. But then, the unexpected, the handle abruptly froze. With ever increasing force, I pulled harder.

Before continuing, I must say a word about my mom. Her gift was not one of patience, especially, after paying nearly forty dollars for a device that was not working on its first application. My mother, like my dad, ascribed failure to the operator rather than the object. In this case, I was operator, car-cooler, the object.

"Jerry, you're not doing it right. You're binding the cord when you pull." The ever increasing temperature, (The vent wind had been shutoff by the car-cooler.) heightened my mother's exasperation so that she let fly a shout that could be heard from "sea to shining sea."

"PULL THE DAMN THING!"

Her admonition could not have affected me more than Perry's shout of:

"Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!"

Likewise, Pickett's historic charge of 15,000 Confederates at the Battle of Gettysburg could not have been launched with a more fierce admonishment.

It so empowered me with a mixed emotion of fear, resolve, strength, and angst, that I pulled with such overwhelming power, not only unloosing the stuck cord but imparting a whip-like high velocity spin to the rotating mesh. That internal Merry-Go-Round spun like the turbine blades of a DC-9's jet engine, whooshing through the lake of car-cooler water, assisted by the seventy mile per hour vent wind, such that a tidal wave flooded over me into the car, crashing down on my dad, the pilot of

the ship.

His response was a flinching pull to the left. We nearly crossed the center stripe before he wrestled the rudder back on course bringing the car to rest along side the highway. Had we battled the most fierce hurricane Columbus encountered on his voyage of discovery, we could not have been wetter.

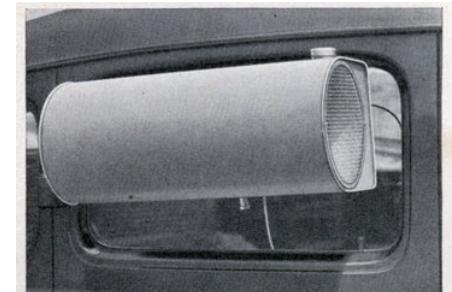
While Dad unlocked the trunk, I rolled down the window and dismounted the empty car-cooler. It was banished among the suitcases and souvenirs, to be stowed henceforth behind the spare tire.

But we were nearing cooler climes, the mountains. Soon, we would be wonderfully cooled by the fresh vent air of the Colorado Rockies. The \$39.95 witty invention, as seen on TV, remained in the trunk, never to be used again after that Great Tidal Wave incident

But best of all, shortly after the Colorado "tough steak debacle", Dad's ledger joined the car-cooler. Somehow, the sunglasses, the tough steak, that \$5 motel, perhaps, the failed car-cooler discouraged his resolve to bring us home under \$400.

Later, I read about Columbus's ledger. Apparently, to appease the crew, he had made false mileage entries in his journal as he voyaged west. When landfall came, the ledger didn't seem as important. Perhaps, this was dad's experience. Instead of fooling the crew, he only had been fooling himself that you could enjoy a vacation keeping an expense account.

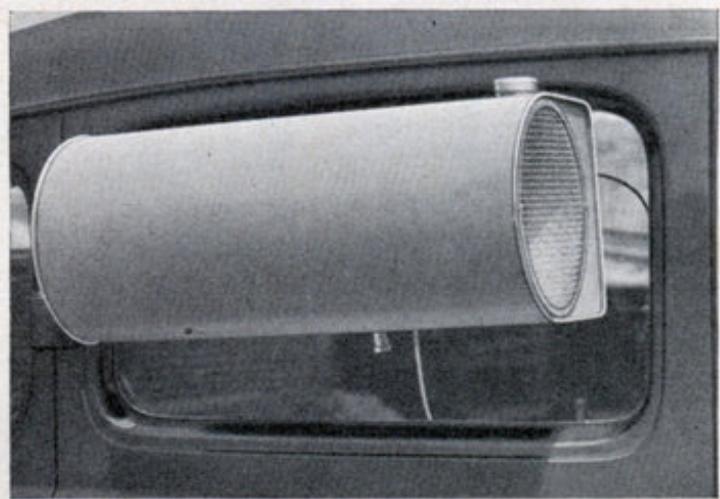
Besides, his Isabella was Mom whose resolve was to enjoy the journey, forget the expense: "Damn the torpedoes, sun glasses, grisly meat, car coolers, and most of all ledgers. Full speed ahead!"



Quickly Installed Air Cooler for Warm-Weather Driving

INSTALLED or removed in a few minutes, the new air cooler shown above fits any make of car. Filtering and purifying the air besides lowering its temperature by evaporating a supply of water, the device operates automatically while the car is in motion. A pair of enterprising operators discovered a way to make a tidy summer profit with a supply of the conditioners. One rented them to west-bound tourists at the Needles, Calif., gate of the Mohave Desert, while his partner collected and re-rented them to east-bound motorists at San Bernardino.

The Ledger Comprehension Questions



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**Vintage Brantwoodian : Auto-Air-Conditioner
Circa 1959**

(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

- _____ 1. Jerry's likens the trip to?
 a. Voyage to the Moon
 b. Columbus' voyage
 c. A Startrek Movie
 d. Around the World in 80 Days

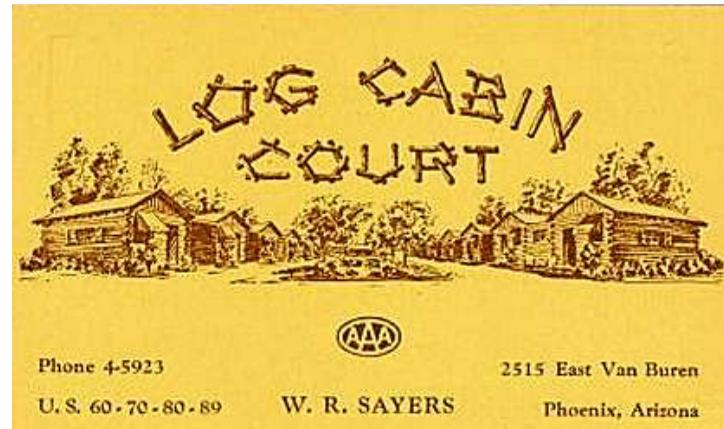
- _____ 2. Jerry's inference about his father is?
 a. he was too thrifty
 b. he didn't watch his spending
 c. he liked expensive dining
 d. none of the above
- _____ 3. Jerry ruined his steak by:
 a. cutting it improperly
 b. using too much A-1 sauce
 c. ordering it well-done
 d. none of the above
- _____ 4. Jerry liked knotty pine.
 (T)rue or (F)alse.
- _____ 5. The car cooler helped make the trip comfortable.
 (T)rue or (F)alse.
- _____ 6. Jerry inferred.
 a. his mom was in charge
 b. his dad was in charge
 c. he was in charge
 d. none of the above
- _____ 7. What did his Mom say about his steak?
 a. "Tasty and wonderful."
 b. "Send the d???? thing back."
 c. "It's Jerry's fault."
 d. "Order hamburger next time."
- _____ 8. His dad's budget was....?
 a. under run
 b. overrun
 c. lavish
 d. none of the above

- _____ 9. What helped keep within budget?
 a. Billboards
 b. Mobile Travel Guide
 c. Advice from other tourists
 d. Picking primitive motels
- _____ 10. How did Jerry learn about adulthood?
 a. watching romance movies
 b. reading the Facts of Life and Love
 c. the comics
 d. from older boys on the playground
- _____ 11. What was the first entry in the ledger?
 a. miles driven the first day
 b. a meal at White Castle
 c. Jerry's clip-on sun glasses
 d. A Buddy Holly record
- _____ 12. How was the air-cooler discovered?
 a. an ad on TV
 b. a service station rented it
 c. a neighbor recommended it
 d. a comic book ad
- _____ 13. Why was a firecracker called a Cherry Bomb?
 a. Mr. Cherry designed it.
 b. The Cherry tree was explosive.
 c. It looked like a Cherry.
 d. No one knew why.
- _____ 14. Who designed the car cooler?
 a. Rube Goldberg
 b. a rocket scientist
 c. an aerospace engineer
 d. not said in the story

- _____ 15. What happened when Jerry pulled the air-cooler's cord?
- its motor failed to start
 - his mother told him to forget it
 - he was soaked with water
 - the air-cooler went airborne
- _____ 16. What happened to the car cooler?"
- trashed at a roadside rest stop
 - sent back to the manufacturer
 - tossed into the trunk
 - dropped off of Pike's Peak
- _____ 17. What was the daily budget?
- about \$40
 - doesn't say
 - \$400
 - varied based on overall budget
- _____ 18. Why was the budget so low?
- things cost less 50 years ago
 - Jerry's dad was cheap
 - the family was poor
 - all of the above
- _____ 19. Why did they choose the \$5 motel?
- to keep the day's budget
 - its western appearance
 - they ran out of gas there
 - no other motel was nearby
- _____ 20. What was not true about the \$5 motel?
- the towels smelled musty
 - the place was full of knotty pine
 - it had a single double bed
 - Gene Autry once slept there

The Ledger Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>
1. consumables	food stuffs
2. skirmish	fight, battle
3. precipitate	cause
4. pyrotechnics	fireworks
5. attrition	wearing away
6. artifacts	objects
7. judiciously	wisely
8. sinew	tendon
9. depravity	coarseness
10. crux	puzzling problem



Suggestive of Dad's \$5 Motel