

Traveling North America in the 1940s

By Juanita Ruth One (Formerly Juanita Huson Sylvest)



In 1946 a couple of young Louisiana journalists, Roland and Malva Huson, hit the road for a lengthy exploration of North America. Their writings were not weighty tomes, but rather weekly Travel Letters to children.

As WWII ended, Roland, my father, had a burning desire to see the United States and talked my mother, Malva, into living his dream. Recognizing that children were very excited when they received rare personal mail, he envisioned writing letters to young subscribers as a way to share the adventure of discovery through travel.

Dad modified their Ford sedan into an early-day RV to serve as transportation, office and living quarters. He hinged the back of the car's front seat to fold down level with the front and rear couch-like bottoms to form a large bed. He also hinged the back of the rear seat to swing up to form a child-sized "berth" which put its occupant (me!) viewing the stars through the slopping rear window.

Into this car they put: a typewriter, a Ditto machine, an icebox, Coleman stove, camping and fishing equipment, a few changes of clothes and their two preschoolers (my toddler brother and 4-yr-old me). During the next two years, we traveled through each of the 48 states, a bit of Canada, down through Mexico and into Guatemala, while they wrote about our adventures to the ever-growing list of subscribing families.

Daddy would attend civic-club meetings in the cities visited and, after telling our story, usually came away with additional subscriptions. Even cartoonists Al Capp of Lil Abner fame and Walt Disney subscribed!

The trip was primarily financed by War Bonds, 300-plus subscriptions and occasional odd jobs. For example, low on money in Washington State, they worked at an apple farm, with Daddy building crates and Mama picking apples while we kids played at their sides. The apples were no longer considered good once they touched the ground, so when I accidentally knocked over a bushel Mom had just picked, she just sat down and cried over her hard work lost!

Juanita and her mom, Malva Huson Brown

In the 1940s organized campgrounds were rare. Most nights were spent sleeping in the car, camped on open land, in city parks, on beaches, by lakes and rivers or streams. Dinner was frequently fresh-caught fish. Once a week, they checked into a "tourist court" to publish their Travel Letters. Each letter featured illustrations in the margins and, although the Ditto people had said it couldn't be done, Daddy invented a way to personalize each salutation.

Mom recalls camping and hiking were pleasurable activities although she laughingly says that, "on hikes our 'backpacks' were frequently children too tired to walk anymore. One adaptation to traveling with two inquisitive preschoolers was the use of child harnesses to prevent my brother or me from getting lost or into danger.

After touring the USA, they crossed into Mexico with a goal of driving all the way to the Panama Canal. Since the Pan American highway was still under construction, they had to put the car on a rail flatcar to cross into Guatemala. One of my vivid memories is standing in the caboose watching my father, who had disembarked to purchase fruit, running to catch the train as we pulled away from the village!

Another vivid memory is getting into fire ants in Guatemala and the local women grabbing me and throwing me into the river to get them off. We also had to fumigate all of our clothing!

At the Honduran border, they encountered a "catch 22" when they were unable to cross for lack of paperwork only obtainable back in the States. Therefore, they backtracked to Guatemala City, sold the car to a physician and booked passage on a United Fruit banana freighter on which we returned home to New Orleans.



Having been a child on that 1940s trip, I was never sure what direct memories I held (except for a few traumas) or what I had reconstructed from having the complete Travel Letters to read and hearing stories my parents told. Therefore, when National Geographic printed a mid-1980s survey showing the extent of geographic illiteracy among U.S. students, I invited mother to join me on an 18-month trip (1989-90) while we once again wrote letters to subscribers (primarily homeschoolers). The "carrots" for her were the comparative luxury of a 29-foot Class A motorhome and the addition of two new states -- Alaska and Hawaii -- to visit. We celebrated her 75th birthday in Alaska!



Juanita Ruth One, now retired into a 27 ft. Class C Fleetwood Jamboree Searcher, divides her time between traveling, Workamping, and blocks of time in Charleston, WV caring for now-93-yr-old Malva? to give brother Roland and his wife opportunities to travel. The 1989-90 Huson Travel Letters that she and her mom wrote are accessible through Huson-travel-letters.com.



Photos: provided by Juanita

- 1. Family photo taken in the 40s*
- 2. Juanita and her mother, Melva Huson Brown*
- 3.? Juanita today*
- 4. Juanita's Class C Fleetwood Jamboree at RiverCamp USA in Piney Creek, N.C. while Workamping there.*