

The Honeymoon

Once the wedding reception was over we departed for a hotel on the outskirts of St. Louis at which I had reserved a suite for the night. At check-in I didn't realize the significance of signing the register as Larry Vardiman. Upon departure the next morning we were presented with a gift from the hotel which has been a bone of contention with Jeannette ever since—a large carton containing about two dozen match books embossed with the name LARRY VARDIMAN. Jeannette has yet to forgive me for not including her name on the registry, so the staff would know we were married. Jeannette continues to be sensitive about the improper use of her name. About a month after we were married I tried to introduce her to some friends but couldn't remember her first name. And, to make matters worse my mother introduced her to some of her friends several months after that as Miss Santen, her maiden name.

The first night of our honeymoon was a challenge for both Jeannette and me. We had a beautiful room with a view of a park below, a king-sized bed, and a small kitchenette. However, we were both neophytes to married life. Jeannette had purchased a beautiful gossamer gown for our first night together, but she was extremely bashful about wearing it in front of me. She decided to reduce her anxiety she would take a hot bath and delay her entrance a little longer. After about an hour I knocked on the bathroom door and inquired if she planned to come out. By then it was about 1 a.m. She said she would be out soon. A half hour later the door slowly opened, and she appeared in her white gown and negligee. She remains as beautiful to me today as the image of her standing there that night almost 50 years ago.

We had a week-long honeymoon, and both wanted to see the mountains of Colorado, but we miscalculated how long it would take to drive there to enjoy the scenery. It took two days to drive to and from Colorado, which only permitted three days to see the mountains. And, most of that was driving. Unfortunately, it was rainy in June of 1965. We drove from Denver through the Rocky Mountain National Park, southward along the collegiate mountain range from Leadville to Salida, down the Arkansas river to Colorado Springs, and along the front range

past Pikes Peak back to Denver, but never actually saw the mountains. It was foggy and rainy most of the time, so the tops of the mountains were always in cloud.

Our first up-close and personal exposure to the Rocky Mountains occurred in the Big Thompson Canyon on the way to Estes Park. We had driven about three miles beyond the entrance to the canyon and were impressed with the size of the mountains and their nearness to the road. At the first turn-out I stopped the car and convinced Jeannette we needed to climb part way up the cliff and look over the top to the bigger mountains beyond. Neither of us had appropriate climbing shoes, but hers were simply flats which tended to slip on the gravel and rocks. Her protestations didn't deter me—we had to do this! We climbed quickly, falling several times, getting jabbed by cactus, and filling our shoes with dirt. As Jeannette's temper began to rise, more insistently demanding that we turn around and go back down, we were nearing our goal. The top of the mountain was only minutes away. We climbed, sweated, and strained our way to the crest and looked over the top. A short distance ahead of us was another mountain of rock and dirt a few hundred feet higher than the one we stood on. Beyond that was a second, and a third, and even more. Nowhere to be seen were snow-covered peaks. Looking back down almost a thousand feet directly below us, we could see our tiny car parked at the side of the road. Hiking back down turned out to be much more difficult. We slid, almost fell, and slid again, ripping the seat of our pants and scrapping the palms of our hands as we made our way slowly back to our car. Jeannette was alternately frightened, angry, and tearful on the way. "What a great experience!", I said as we climbed into the car and continued our drive up the Canyon. An icy silence greeted me from the passenger seat.

One picture from our honeymoon keeps popping into my head--Jeannette standing in the front door of a log cabin in the woods on the Big Thompson River near Estes Park, Colorado wearing a pair of pink, fuzzy slippers, in her pajamas, and her hair full of curlers. What a picture of married bliss! It was on this evening that I requested Jeannette prepare me a meal of steak and potatoes. However, when we settled into our little cabin in the woods Jeannette informed me that she didn't know how to cook. I had never thought to ask her that question. I had just assumed all women knew how to cook. Needless to say, I got to cook the meal myself. The food was good, but I began to wonder if this marriage was going to work out.

One night during our honeymoon was especially exciting. I wanted to camp out while we were in the mountains, so I had brought along a tent. On the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park, I rented a campsite for one night and pitched our tent in the rain while Jeannette watched from inside the car. Once I got the tent up she ran from the car into the tent, crawled with me into our two sleeping bags zipped together, and we tried to sleep. However, we kept sliding down hill as we rolled around trying to sleep on the hard, uncomfortable ground. Our feet got cold and wet as we kept sliding out the unzipped door of the tent. I had forgotten pillows and pitched the tent on a slight incline to elevate our heads. We didn't get much rest that night. To make matters worse when we awoke the next morning the tent was covered with about an inch of clear ice. It had continued raining during the night as the temperature dropped below freezing and rime ice covered everything, including our tent. Packing a wet, icy tent into the trunk of a car while trying to stay warm was a real challenge. That night was an early test of our married bliss.

Another event is especially memorable from our honeymoon. We decided to go horse back riding one afternoon in Rocky Mountain National Park. There was a stable at the bottom of Thunder Mountain which rented horses and provided a wrangler to accompany a group of riders. On that day there were no other riders, so Jeannette and I rode alone with the wrangler. The first part of the ride was beautiful. When we reached the pass near Thunder Mountain the view of the lower parts of the mountains below the cloud layers was spectacular. But, I should have known from the name of the mountain that the weather could be treacherous. As we sat on our horses viewing the scenery the clouds began to threaten and a few large drops of rain began to pelt the ground. Our wrangler suggested we pull out the ponchos which were rolled up and tied to the back of our saddles. They were large, yellow rubbery raincoats with a hood and a large U-shaped hole in the back which fit over the horse's rumps. We put them on and the horses began to walk back down the mountain toward home. The rain began to increase, and the horses began to trot. Then the wind came up and small hail began to fall. Lightning flashed, and thunder crashed all around us. The horses picked up more speed and it became difficult to see clearly where we were headed in the rain and hail. Then the horses broke into a full gallop and assumed control as they headed for the barn. The hail and cold wind stung our faces and hands making it difficult to hold the reins. We

finally reached the safety of the barn and were relieved to get off the frightened horses and look for some hot chocolate. Are honeymoons supposed to be that exciting?

We drove Jeannette's Pontiac to Colorado on our honeymoon. I didn't own a car when we got married. However, it never quite became *our* car. One time when I drove too carelessly through a mud puddle Jeannette let me know that I was not to drive her car so disrespectfully. After several other similar incidents during the next year I could see that *her* car had the potential of becoming a problem between us, so I coerced her into trading it for a new Chrysler Fury. But on our honeymoon this issue had not yet been revealed. I drove most of the trip on scary mountain roads and boring interstate highways. Near the end of our mountain driving in Colorado Jeannette was anxious to get behind the wheel of her car again.

When we took a scenic one-way mountain road near Cañon City, Colorado she asked to drive. I stopped the car and let her take over at the beginning of a straight, smooth, single-lane, blacktop road which climbed to a peak over a short series of hills and valleys.. It looked like a fun roller coaster ride. Unknown to either of us was the fact that beyond the topmost hill ahead of us the road began a rapid descent over a longer series of little hills and valleys. On the left side of the road a cliff dropped at a steep angle to the town of Cañon City about 2,000 feet below and on the right was a 45° cliff downward by about 1,000 feet. There were no guard rails on either side. Jeannette accelerated up the hill, over the top, and down the other side without ever realizing the danger on either side. I was so surprised at the speed at which she was driving and the sudden appearance of cliffs all around us, I froze in the right seat and couldn't even open my mouth to warn her to slow down. She was having the time of her life flying over the little hills and valleys in the road completely oblivious to the empty space to her left and right. I was holding on for dear life as the car bounced up and down over the little bumps in the road. She finally reached a turn-out about a mile beyond the tallest hill where the road widened and pulled over to stop the car. She was smiling with excitement while I collapsed in relief. She still remembers that road with fondness and I have nightmares about it yet today.