

The Long, Long Trailer

Did you ever see the movie, *The Long, Long Trailer*, starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez? If you haven't, you need to, particularly if you're considering becoming an RV'er. It's a classic comedy from the '50s illustrating the pitfalls of pulling a trailer behind your car or truck.

Desi must learn how to back the trailer without mowing down his relative's hedges and mailboxes. And he and Luci must learn how to communicate directions via a mirror, that reverses the images, between the front and back of the long, long trailer. And, Desi can't climb the Rockies because of all the rocks Luci collected and stored in the trailer.

Several of our friends encouraged Jeannette and me to rent the movie before we started traveling in earnest with our 50-foot rig. We learned a few tricks from the movie that prevented us from getting in too much trouble, such as not collecting too many rocks, as Luci did. But, maybe, we should have viewed the movie more than once because we made many of the same dumb mistakes Luci and Desi did.

Our travel trailer was a ten-year old, 27-foot long, Keystone Sprint we purchased when we sold our last home on Camano Island, Washington. We lived in our trailer full-time for four years and traveled locally around the Northwest the first year. We loved our trailer. It had a solid wooden interior and a 12-foot slide out in the living room. Although somewhat small, it was very comfortable.

I pulled the Sprint with an old 1991 GMC 3/4-ton conversion van with a 350-inch V8 engine we had driven for years. The van had 250,000 miles on it, so was beginning to slowly lose power because of age and mileage. The van had enough power to get us over the Siskiyou Mountains in Oregon the first time we traveled to California without a problem in 2014, because we didn't carry heavy books and extra clothing. The empty weight of the trailer was 7,000 pounds. The second time we made the trip, we probably carried an additional 1,000 pounds in assorted items, and the engine had lost horsepower over the previous two years.

On our way to Redding, California in 2016 where I taught at Shasta Bible College, we were attempting to thread the needle between ice storms that had closed I-5 between Portland and Medford, Oregon. We delayed our departure from northern Washington by a day because of heavy snow in the Cascades. I had to shovel a foot of snow off the top of our trailer before we could leave Rockport, Washington where we had spent the summer and fall.

We passed through Portland following an ice storm and found abandoned vehicles and damaged roadside structures everywhere along the freeway. Our goal was to arrive in Medford, Oregon at the foot of a ten-mile climb up and over the Siskiyou the night before the next storm was forecast to close the road later in the day.

Our plan was working to perfection, until we stopped to camp for the night before attacking the 4,000-foot climb early the next morning. The weather was cold and dry through southern Washington and Oregon and the road was clear. We arrived in our RV park that evening for an early dinner, so we could depart early in the morning.

While Jeannette fixed a meal, I took one last look at the weather and discovered that the next storm was arriving about twelve hours sooner than I had anticipated. And, worse than that, a series of storms were marching across the Pacific Ocean poised to shut the highway to truck and trailer traffic across the Siskiyou for the next week. Wind, snow, and ice would force us to remain in Oregon through Christmas and possibly miss the start of classes the first week of January if we didn't get moving. We would have to break camp immediately and drive all night to beat the storm!

By ten p.m. we were at the foot of the Ashland grade on Interstate 5 just south of Medford, Oregon beginning the climb toward the summit. We passed a warning sign suggesting that all vehicles should carry chains, but no travel restrictions were in force. Within a mile up the hill it began to drizzle and within two miles the drizzle turned to snow. By mile three the snow was accumulating on the roadway and the visibility was down to a few hundred feet.

At this point I realized things were going to get really challenging. Having been up this section of the highway many times before, I knew there was no place

to turn around until near the top, still seven miles ahead. My van was running well, but I had downshifted to the lowest gear possible and was moving at only 10 miles per hour with the accelerator floored. I wasn't sure I could make it to the top if I lost any more speed. My only option would be to pull to the side of the road and park. But, If I did so, we would probably spend the rest of the night there because I wouldn't be able to get moving again. And, it was possible my van and trailer could be stranded for many days because of the approaching storms.

So, I kept the pedal to the metal and hoped for the best. By mile five, half way up the grade, the snow on the road had accumulated to 4 inches. A new concern began to bother me. I only had regular tires on the van, not snow tires. Would I be able to maintain enough traction to keep heading up the hill? I had tire chains with me and could pull over and put them on, but if I did so, I would not be able to get moving again because of the steepness of the grade and the heavily loaded trailer. One benefit of the heavy trailer was that I had more than enough weight on the back tires of the van to avoid slippage if the road didn't become icy. Fortunately, the falling snow was still slushy at the beginning of the storm. I hoped the temperature wouldn't get colder at the summit and I would remain in slush.

Between mile seven and eight on the Medford grade the road steepens slightly and my speed began to drop. When it reached 5 miles per hour my van began to complain. I don't know if it was the engine or the transmission or both, but suddenly it started jumping and surging and making awful noises. I decided I'd just have to ride it out over this steeper section. It sounded like something was going to break loose at any moment and our climb up the mountain would be over. I already had the warning blinkers going and I was driving in the slow lane. I was afraid if my van quit now I wouldn't have enough momentum to pull over out of the traffic, so I pulled over even more, almost off the road.

As we jumped and jolted up the hill, Jeannette woke up in the right seat where she had been sleeping and yelled, "What's going on? What's wrong with the van? Why is it jumping up and down?"

"We've bogged down going up the hill because the trailer's too heavy," I yelled back over the rattling and shaking. "I don't know if we'll make it or not. If the van doesn't keep going, we'll probably spend the night on the hill!"

Jeannette said, "We need prayer." She picked her cell phone and while I kept the van bouncing and lurching up the road, she called Billie Moore, a good friend and prayer warrior in Darrington, Washington, described our dilemma, and asked her to pray that we would make it to the top of the hill.

By that time, it was almost 11 o'clock at night. We continued to jerk along for about two more miles and the road became less steep. We gained a little speed and the jumping lessened. Finally, the jumping stopped altogether, and we reached a speed of 10 miles per hour once again. I looked outside, and the snow now was at least 8 inches deep. But, it was still slushy.

We finally reached the summit in another ten minutes and the road leveled out. All along the summit wherever there was a wide spot, eighteen wheelers had pulled off the road and were putting on their chains. I thought, "Maybe I'd better put mine on too. I think I'll pull over and consider it.

But, more importantly, I badly needed to use the bathroom! Ever since the snow had started near the bottom of the hill, I had needed to go. It really became urgent when the van started jumping up and down. I was able to finally pull off the road. I carefully avoided any place I might get stuck, opened the door, and ran over to the side of the road to carve my initials in the snow.

As I returned to get in the driver's side of the van, a State patrolman pulled over near me, opened his passenger window, and inquired if we were okay. I tipped my hat and said, "Thanks, we're alright. Just needed to hit the head after that climb up the hill.

He replied, "Good, just wanted to check," and headed over the summit and disappeared in the falling snow.

I looked at the snow and realized it was still slushy. I decided if I kept driving carefully and slowly, downhill for the next 30 miles, I should be able to get through the worst of the snow before it turned to ice. So, I decided to forego putting on the chains and drove the last hundred miles to Redding, California at 20 miles per hour until we finally ran out of snow. We arrived early in the morning at Shasta Bible College and slept until noon!

After that harrowing trip I decided I needed a newer van with a little more oomph. I've driven lots of mountain roads in winter snow and bad driving conditions, but climbing the Medford grade pulling a long, heavy trailer with an underpowered van was the scariest road trip I've ever made. I think I aged ten years in that one hour!