

## **Fording a Creek and Getting Off a Mountain**

One of our family traditions when my kids were still at home was to take day trips to the mountains several times each month. It started when we moved to Colorado in 1970. We'd pile into one of our old cars and take one route into the mountains and return another to see different scenery. I suppose it began because my wife, Jeannette, and I grew up in the Midwest near St. Louis, where the only interesting terrain was along the rivers, like the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Merrimac.

Upon arriving in Colorado, the terrain was dominated by mountains and valleys along the Front Range and westward into the Rocky Mountains. Almost every valley had some type of road, normally gravel or dirt, and we seemed driven to locate where the roads ended, or possibly continued through a mountain pass to the other side.

We owned a series of old cars over the years and drove them like jeeps. Three of them were station wagons that allowed room for our family of six to ride comfortably, for at least day trips. I never owned a van until the kids had all left home, which I always regretted because traveling long distances would have been so much more enjoyable. The first station wagon was a 1958 seven passenger, blue, Ford Fairlane, the second a 1973 nine passenger, gold, Ford Country Squire with simulated wood paneling, and the third a 1969 seven passenger, white Dodge Coronet. The old white Dodge was affectionately called the, "refrigerator on wheels" because it was so ugly. It was the longest lasting car I ever owned. I developed a philosophy about cars based on my experiences. "The uglier the car, the longer it lasts!"

It was amazing how agile a heavily loaded station wagon could be, climbing old mountain roads and trails to high places with a view. We would frequently bounce and grind our way up a mountain trail to some remote lookout on a Saturday outing with our family of six and pull in next a group of four wheelers and watch their faces drop as we arrived. Their expression said it all. "What the #\$%@& are they doing up here? I paid big bucks for my fancy rig with knobby tires, raised suspension, roll bars, and a hopped-up engine, and he comes up here with an old station wagon full of kids! "

It was sometimes risky to drive long distances into remote terrain. We occasionally had car trouble or got stuck in the snow or mud, exposing my young family to cold weather, wild animals, and mountain men. It may not have been the smartest activity, but, we always seemed to escape disaster.

One time in Colorado we drove up a side canyon from the Poudre River west of Ft. Collins, into a lonely valley just below the Never Summer Range in the Rocky Mountain National Park. We came to a washed-out bridge in the road where four-wheelers had forded the six-inch deep stream nearby. The water wasn't too swift and the gravel on the floor of the creek looked passable, so I decided to attempt it in my 1965 Plymouth Fury sedan loaded with my family. Unfortunately, I didn't count on the low suspension to cause my front and back bumpers to hang up on the creek banks. The car came to a stop in the middle of the creek and my rear wheels couldn't gain enough traction to pull us out of our predicament.

To make matters worse, Jeannette's mother was visiting and had come along for a scenic mountain drive. She became quite fearful about being trapped in a mountain stream with six inches of water flowing beneath the car. There was only one thing to do. Everybody had to climb out to reduce the weight on the car's springs, so the bumpers would lift off the creek banks. The older kids had a lark, exiting the car and splashing through the water to escape the stranded car. But, Jeannette and her mom, were not thrilled. They exited the car with screams and angry threats. I had to find a nearby plank to extend across the creek by my mother-in-law's back door, so she could walk to shore without getting wet. We lifted and tugged to get grandma up out of the car, onto the plank, and helped her unsteadily to the rear bank.

Fortunately, with the weight removed I was able to drive the car out of the creek, turn it around, and ford the creek again to head back down the mountain. I reloaded two happy daughters, one upset, pregnant wife, and a completely frightened and angry grandmother into the car and headed silently back home.

But, this was not our only misadventure in the mountains. I can remember at least a dozen other exciting, treacherous calamities. Some in the Sierras, several others in California, one in Mexico, one in Utah, two in Arizona, one in Wyoming,

several more in Colorado, and even one on a remote road around the north end of Maui (See my story, The Little Grass Shack).

One weekend in the early spring when we lived in Evergreen, Colorado, our family drove south through the backcountry to the back side of Pikes Peak. Rather than take the main road down the mountain to Colorado Springs, we decided to try an abandoned railroad bed around the south side of the mountain. It had formerly been the route of the old Victor Gold Mine near the top of the mountain. The railroad transported ore to a mill at the foot of Pikes Peak.

The tracks had been removed and the roadbed graveled. It was a gorgeous route that traveled down the mountain at a constant grade with views to the east and south, and high, narrow tunnels cut through portions of the mountain. We had never been on this road before and knew nothing about where it ended below. We had no map, but figured, surely, it must end up in Colorado Springs.

We had traveled about twenty miles and noticed there were no exits or turnarounds on this road. And, it was too narrow to turn around on. This had not seemed to be a problem until I noticed that snow began to appear on the roadway from previous storms. As we continued downhill on the constant grade, the snow got deeper and deeper. And, worse there were no tracks from other vehicles in the snow, indicating we were the first travelers on this route since the last snowstorm.

The snow got deeper and deeper until it reached the undercarriage of the car. If it got much deeper, I would be forced to stop and back up the road for over twenty miles to return to civilization. About then, we approached another tunnel which meant we would not be driving in snow until we emerged again, but what conditions would we find on the other end of the tunnel?

When we emerged from the tunnel, we found the snow on the other side to be about sixteen inches, too deep to continue without getting stuck! And, I had no idea how far we were from town, or even if the road continued through. I certainly didn't want to back through the tunnel, and what was now, probably 25 miles of road, back up the mountain.

I decided to get out of the car and walk through the snow to see what was around the corner I couldn't yet see. I trudged through about a hundred yards of

knee-deep snow and saw a beautiful sight. There were car tracks in the snow ahead of me and a turnaround. Someone had driven up from Colorado Springs in the snow and when it became too deep, had turned around and gone back down the mountain. Fantastic! All I had to do was plow my way through about a hundred yards of sixteen-inch deep snow to the beginning of the car tracks, and we should be able to escape our self-made prison.

I returned to my family in the car and shared the good news that we were going to survive. Jeannette looked puzzled. She asked, "Survive? What are you talking about?"

I responded, "That's okay. Don't worry about it. We're fine now."

I backed the car about a hundred feet into the tunnel, gunned the car, and shot out into the open at about thirty miles an hour. We plowed through the deep snow, slowing as it began to build up in front of the car. But, we had enough momentum to make it around the corner and into the tracks of the previous vehicle. As we continued downhill the depth of snow on the ground decreased, and by the time we reached the outskirts of Colorado Springs we were back on dry pavement.

"We survived once again," I shouted happily to my family.

Jeannette looked at me quizzically and said, "What?"