



On the Road

Christine Brooks Cote



I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, wearing red shorts and a red-and-yellow top, sitting in the back seat of my father’s 1955 red-and-white Oldsmobile. He was driving and smoking, while my nervous mother sat in the passenger seat, praying, I imagine, that we would make it safely to California. Boxes were piled around me, containing only as many necessary household items as would fit in the car. To me there was only one box that mattered—the one containing a shallow white porcelain basin holding water, a few rocks, some food scraps, and my turtle. We had heard that cars were checked upon entering the Golden State, and some items could not be taken across the border. We worried that my turtle might not be allowed to cross, so when I wasn’t looking in the box to be sure the little creature was still alive and had food, the box was shoved under the front seat, out of view.

Our road trip started in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where all of my great-grandparents settled after arriving in the United States from areas in and around Posen, a province of Prussia, which today is part of Poland. My ancestors came over in the mid-1800s, and now, roughly a hundred years later, my parents were seeking a new life in California—San Diego, to be

specific. I don’t know much about their decision to make such a bold move, but I think it had something to do with financial problems and my father hoping to find work as a machinist at one of several airplane manufacturing companies in southern California. My parents gave away everything they owned except what fit in the car, so all signs pointed to them wanting a fresh start. California in the sixties and seventies was dramatically different from the life they had known in the thirties, forties, and fifties in Wisconsin, making it the perfect place to either start over and build a new life or be defeated by the challenges of adjusting to something so different.

We were traveling on U. S. Route 66, which started in Chicago and ended in Santa Monica, California. At some point after crossing the border into California, we would leave Route 66 and head southwest to San Diego. Route 66 was established in 1926 and eventually earned a comfortable spot in popular culture. It was featured in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Seeing it as a symbol of refuge for families escaping hardship and seeking new opportunities, Steinbeck called Route 66 the Mother Road. It was the road taken by many families who migrated west in the 1930s

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. She has called Maine her home for the last thirty years.

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during the Great Depression and the years of the Dust Bowl, and a couple of decades later, significant numbers of people again traveled the route to leave the Midwest for better economic opportunities. “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66” was a hit song in 1946, and *Route 66* was a television series that aired on CBS from 1960 to 1964. Over the years, many motels, diners, ice cream stands, and gas stations—then called filling stations—were built on the route, all of which supported the economies of the towns and cities through which it passed. Route 66 was officially removed from the United States Highway System in 1985, though some segments of the historic route still exist. Today the sale of Route 66 memorabilia is a huge industry, and it is even possible to take weeklong guided tours along the historic route.

My memories of the trip are few, but I vividly remember crossing the Mississippi. As this mighty river is an important demarcation in our country—both geographically and culturally—and neither my parents nor anyone they knew had ever been west of the Mississippi, they were sure to give the crossing some attention. I also remember stopping for breakfast in Amarillo, Texas, having waffles with whipped cream, which seemed an odd thing to put on waffles. Next, a motel in New Mexico or Arizona sticks in my mind because of a collection of brightly colored metal chairs on the lawn. And,

lastly, I remember my mother repeatedly yelling at my father to be careful as we drove the narrow and curvy roads through the Rocky Mountains; she was a Nervous Nellie, for sure.

Over the years, I’ve often thought about how differently my life turned out because I grew up in San Diego rather than Milwaukee. California was such a different place, something I didn’t fully realize until I went back to visit relatives when I was in my twenties. We always said that no one was actually born in California; everyone there came from somewhere else. So I met, made friends, and later worked with people from varied parts of the country, as well as from Mexico, Bolivia, China, Japan, and surely others I can’t remember. That would not have been the case in Milwaukee, and these experiences certainly impacted my view of the world, enlarged my way of thinking, and made me a more tolerant and curious person. Also, in the 1960s and 70s, California was a place on the move—growing in population while developing and modernizing its cities and towns. The building of new roads, highways, and bridges was constant—I remember when the Coronado Bridge was built—and my father and I would get in line to be among the first ones to drive on those new structures. Greater San Diego kept expanding its reach with the establishment of new neighborhoods and housing developments. New towns popped up out of nowhere. With such



growth comes a sense of optimism and adventure. Of course, many of the cultural changes happening in the sixties with regard to civil rights, feminism, sexuality, entertainment, music and art, even clothing and hair styles had strong representation in California. I grew up believing that I could do anything, be anything, live anywhere. There was nothing to hold me back. My life stretched before me, and I welcomed both the opportunities and the challenges.

Route 66 was my escape from insularity and my road to opportunity. I think my mother fared well too, mainly because she enjoyed exposing me to different life experiences—parks, museums, concerts—and San Diego had so much to offer. I can’t say the

same for my father; he was a Milwaukee man through and through, loving his beer, sausage, and Green Bay Packers. He never found work at an airplane company, and his skills as a machinist were increasingly behind the times. I don’t think he was ever really happy in California. He missed the old ways and traditions. Yet his decision to make that trip on Route 66 in his 1955 red-and-white Oldsmobile changed his daughter’s life, and for that I will always be grateful. Maybe, just maybe, he knew that would happen. *

No one saw my turtle in the porcelain basin when we went through the checkpoint going into California. It lived another ten years.