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# HITCHHIKING AMERICA

## BY KAROLYNN CLARK

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It was Rusty's idea. Hitchhike to the 1972 Republican Convention in Miami for the Vietnam Vets Against the War rally and march. As a Vietnam vet, he was involved with the Seattle group and had me involved too. I guess no one else wanted to run the film projector, so they took me along to run it every time they wanted to show "The Winter Soldier Investigations". I learned all that equipment stuff in my elementary education classes at the University of Washington. So why not go to Miami?

"What about all our stuff and the cats?" I asked.

"Can your parents take the cats and maybe store some of our stuff in Spokane? And we'll just sell what we don't want to keep."

So we sold a bunch of furniture, books and the car. Quit our jobs – they weren't much anyway! We rented a truck to haul the stuff we wanted to keep and Aries and Muad 'Dib (our dear cats) and headed for Spokane. Thank goodness my parents had extra space and could open their home to two very spoiled cats. We spent a week or so in Spokane, visiting my family (who thought I was crazy). They just shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders. Rusty and I were both first-born children. We were adventurers and we were hippies. We had to really spend some time figuring out what to take with us - backpacks, sleeping bags, one warm jacket each, a couple of shorts, a couple of jeans, our hiking boots and a pair of sandals for the hot weather in the South. Oh yeah, and some underwear – no bras for me. Those were the freedom days! It was a good thing I didn't wear makeup and didn't need rollers for my long hair. There would have been no room for all that girly stuff anyway. To this day I don't know how I did that, travel clear across country and back with just a backpack to keep me going. I don't even remember how we washed our clothes, or even took showers sometimes. Hippies weren't dirty, smelly people by choice; just hard to do that when you're hitchhiking across country with very little money in your pockets.

The day finally came for our adventure to start; it was July 5, 1972. America here we come!! Our goal was to see as much of America as we could on our way to Miami. Our first ride was with the father of my brother-in-law; he took us all the way to Missoula, Montana. It is there that Rusty and I learned how to find places to spend the night. We sort of found it by accident. You see we decided to go have a beer at a local tavern. We walked around until we heard rock and roll music. In we went with our backpacks and sleeping bags, set them on the floor and got a beer. Pretty soon a couple people came over to find out what we were up to.

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“Hey, whatcha doin’ with them backpacks?” said the stranger.

Almost in unison Rusty and I replied, “Hitchhiking to the Republican Convention in Miami.”

“Well you don’t look like no Republican, so whatcha gonna do?”

“March with the Vietnam Vets Against the War,” Rusty replied.

“You a Vietnam Vet?”

“Yep, and this is my wife.”

That did it! The guy invited his buddy and girlfriend over and we talked and talked about the war and the government and peace. We did a little dancing, but didn’t drink much more beer – we needed to watch our money.

“So where ya two gonna spend the night?” our newfound friend asked.

“Don’t know, probably just hike up the road a bit and see if we can see a park or woods and put out our sleeping bags,” Rusty said.

I usually let him do most of the talking, his slightly southern accent usually impressed people - \* more than my lack of an accent. Well, you know, we were still in the West. But by time we got to the South that changed and I was the one they wanted to hear – with my funny “Yankee” accent. Anyway, we were offered a house to sleep in if we didn’t mind sleeping on the floor. That worked for us.

And when the people of the house) got up the next day, so did we and started on our way. We stopped at some small café for coffee and donuts and headed on our way. We weren’t sure what to expect as far as rides. We got a couple of rides that morning that took us about 100 miles or so to the north and we ended up in Kalispell which was good as we wanted to spend some time in Glacier Park. We hiked around in the woods a bit and then got hungry, so **WE** picked a likely little café and went in for a light supper. Again we drew some curious gawking, but no one approached us. It was close to 7pm when we left the café and heard the sounds of some Grateful Dead coming from the bar two or three buildings down.

“Well, darlin’,” Rusty said, “You think we could find someone like last night?”

“Can’t hurt to try, and if we don’t we can go back to that little wooded park down the road and sleep in that nice grove of trees,” I said.

So in we went, put down the backpacks ordered beers and decided to dance. Again we got some gawkers and when we sat down, we had a couple of guys come over to check us out. One thing led to another and before the night was through we were at a little commune in which we could spend the night. - on the floor of course. Well we stayed up late and talked and talked. These folks were really interested in what was happening in Seattle with the anti-war movement. No one seemed to need to go anywhere the next morning, so we all had coffee and talked some more. They asked us to stay another night and see the great band that was coming into town. They took us all around the Flathead Lake area and when we got back home that night, they cooked us a good dinner. And then off to the bar to listen to a “great band”. And it was a great band; we all had a great time dancing the night away. Our newfound friends had school and work the next day, so we all headed out before noon.

Rusty and I had some walking to do before we got a ride. A husband and wife with his mother along in a camper. We were amazed that these people would pick us up, but once inside the truck, it was like we all knew each other for a long time.

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We even took pictures of each other at the Glacier National Park sign. I have no idea the names of these people, but they were the first of many who picked us up who had never picked up hitchhikers before. I remember taking the Road to the Sun highway so high up and so narrow. And once we came down to the beautiful Lake McDonald we were taking pictures like crazy, it was just so beautiful with the mountains a perfect reflection in that pristine lake. Our friends left us there and we went hiking around the area and camped out that night in Glacier Park.

You know, to this day, I cannot remember what we ate. I know we had brought some food with us, but not much. I think we probably both lost a lot of weight on this adventure. I do know that whenever we could we would stop at a Dairy Queen for milkshakes and sometimes a burger.

The next day we walked the highway again. We got a couple of rides and then we ended up in Browning. Now here was a place that wasn't too happy to see longhaired hippie men. So we didn't stay long. I have a couple of pictures of some parade or something in Browning; there were having what they called "Indian Days". But as I said, we didn't stay long. We got a couple of rides through the lonely Montana countryside and finally hooked up with a minister in a Volkswagen bus who drove us all the way into Great Falls. We talked all the way and he excitedly told us about the Youth Hostel his church had set up. As we got closer to Great Falls he must have felt comfortable with us as he asked us if we would be interested in managing the hostel for awhile. We told him we needed to look at it and think it over. So our first night in Great Falls was spent in that hostel. The next morning the minister whose name I cannot remember, dropped by and asked us what our decision was.

"We can do this for about a month, if that is okay with you," I said.

"Great!" he said.

"But we would like to get a hotplate and refrigerator for food," Rusty said, "How can we do that?"

Well, we must have been really trustworthy looking hippies because our minister friend gave us directions to a place that he was going to call to have both of those things waiting for us, AND, he was loaning us his bus to go pick them up if we could drop him at the church. WOW. So we picked up a two-burner hotplate and an old refrigerator and we were all set.

The hostel was in an old gymnasium and we had a little area all our own while any visitors had to sleep on the gym floor. There were the girl's shower and restroom and the boy's shower and restroom that we all had to use. Our minister friend brought us other furniture and some cooking utensils so we could have some home cooked meals – mostly I did the cooking. We made it quite cozy and had a good time while we were they're sometimes exploring the area. It was great fun!

Our next door – really across the parking lot neighbor – was a home for troubled teens. It is funny when I look at these pictures and I see the Dad, Lars, and the cute little 3 year daughter, Maya and all those teenagers, but I do not see one picture of the Mother, the woman who put this all together. I even went back to see her a few years later, but just don't remember her name. Rusty and I hung out over there every chance we got, particularly if we didn't have guests at our hostel. I feel I could have lived there for years, but, of course, we had an agenda, so that was not possible.

We didn't get many people passing through to use the hostel, but I do remember young people from New York and from California and one lonely bicycle rider who was going across country. He was probably the most interesting of all of our visitors because he had stories like we had of all the good people that took care of

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him on the road.

Soon there was a little bickering between Rusty and me that was getting worse as the days in Montana dragged on. To this day I don't know what caused it, but I remember throwing my wedding ring at him, packing up my stuff and hitching into town to catch the greyhound back to Spokane. I couldn't get one until the next morning so I found an old hotel to spend the night. I led a sheltered life and never spent much time in hotels, but I knew this one was a place for those that were down and out. The whole floor shared a bathroom. I remember being afraid the door didn't really lock and someone would walk in on me, but no one did. And I put a chair or a dresser up against the door of the room so no one would be able to get in. I hopped the bus and sat there debating whether or not I was doing the right thing. I wasn't someone who ran away from a problem, and this was something that was bothering me. And the other thing that was gnawing at me was the fact that I may never have another chance to see America the way I would with Rusty.

I had to change busses in Missoula and while I waited, I called my parents. Mainly just to let them know how I was. I didn't tell them I was coming home because I was still debating that in my mind. In the end I exchanged my ticket for one heading back to Great Falls and got there that evening and hitched a ride back to the hostel. We must have made up because things were pretty good for the rest of the stay there in Great falls.

All too soon the time came to get back on the road to Miami. I don't remember who took over the hostel when we left, if anyone did, maybe they closed it as it was getting close to the end of the summer. There was a party for us at the Teen Home and tears were shed by me and many of the teenagers.

And we were on the road again to see America. We were hitching rides to Denver to meet up with some of Rusty's Vietnam Vet Against the War friends. Along the way we passed through beautiful, lonely Wyoming. I remember passing Teapot Dome and many oil fields. Those oil rigs looked so out of place in the wide-open spaces of Wyoming. There should have been buffalo and cattle and sheep out there, but I sure didn't see any buffalo there, and very few cattle or sheep. It just looked so desolate. I was told there were more cattle in Wyoming than people. I believed it!

We finally made it to Denver and met up with Rusty's friends. One was Ted, an old friend of ours from Seattle. We were to meet up with them in Miami and march together. I can't remember how they were getting to Miami, but they sure weren't hitchhiking like we were. We stayed a couple of days in Denver, tried out their Coors beer and headed out. We got a ride to Nebraska (now I had been to Nebraska a couple of times before since I had relatives there, but I sure never realized it was that close to Denver. I couldn't imagine a land so flat after the high Rocky Mountains, but that it was and there was lots of corn in both Nebraska and Kansas. I have pictures of me sitting along the rode in shorts and sandals amongst the cornfields of Kansas waiting and waiting and waiting for a ride. The rides came but slowly and never took us far. We did a lot of sleeping under the stars in Nebraska and Kansas.

Our next big stop was Kansas City on the border of Kansas and Missouri. We got a ride with some guy who was drinking schnapps while driving. He was getting drunker and drunker and his driving was getting scarier and scarier. We finally hopped out of the car at a streetlight and got out of his way. We did some walking that night before we got our next ride. It must have been close to 9PM and somewhat dark. We were now on the Missouri side of Kansas City when a woman all by herself stopped for us. We got in and started talking to her.

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I remember asking, "Why did you stop for us?"

She said, "I've never picked up hitchhiker before, but you just looked like okay kids to pick up."

Now remember, it was almost dark, she couldn't have seen very much of us. She didn't take us very far, but did tell us about a state park just a few miles away from where she dropped us off that we could probably spend the night. So we started walking. Shortly after that we had the scariest minutes of our hitchhiking days.

Some guys drove by in a truck and yelled out, "Hey, you hippies get out of here. We don't wantcha here."

The car passed us, but we hurried along toward the park just ahead. Then we heard the car squeal to a stop and turn back towards us. We ran into the park and hid in a ditch surrounded by bushes. We were so scared both of us thinking of the movie "Easy Rider" and wondering if we were going to end up like the Donald Sutherland character. Our hearts were beating so hard, it is a wonder those guys didn't hear it. They drove up and down the street a few times, making lots of noise and yelling, but thankfully didn't stop nor get out of the truck.

Rusty and I hardly spoke for fear of those guys coming back and getting us. We didn't even open our sleeping bags that night. Neither one of us got much sleep. We held hands and sort of kept a look out. I was feeling like some old west soldier keeping a look out for the bad guys or maybe the Indians.

Finally the morning came bright and cheery. We both sighed and, although we were tired, we headed back along the park trail for a bit before venturing back on the highway.

I don't remember much between Kansas City and Memphis, but somehow we got there. That is when another minister in a VW picked us up – this one was a VW bug. He was headed to Nashville to a bible camp for young people. He told us about when he worked with Martin Luther King and how much King meant to him. Just outside of Jackson, Tennessee, his VW broke down. He and Rusty walked to the nearest phone booth and because we had AAA, we were able to get his bug towed into Jackson. He called a friend there who met up with us. His friend was probably a minister too and he brought this darling baby with him. So the four of us adults with me carrying the baby walked to a restaurant for lunch. Being a kid from a small city in Washington, I had never really experienced much prejudice. I sure did now. People snickered and looked at us funny and made comments that I couldn't really hear, but figured they weren't good. What was wrong with a couple of white kids hanging out with a couple of black guys and a baby? None of us meant any harm to anyone.

When the car was fixed we headed back on the road. I gave the baby a big hug and off we went. We talked and sang old songs along the way. It was a fun ride! To thank us for helping him with his car, the minister took us with him to the bible camp. It was in the Tennessee Hills just outside of Nashville. We ate dinner there and sat around the fire singing old gospel songs with the young people there. There were teenagers and some older kids about our age. It was so much fun. That night we spent in a cabin and next morning woke up to more singing and breakfast. One of the young men had to go to work in Nashville, so we rode back with him.

We rode up to the camp at night so I didn't get to see much, but coming down in the morning with the sunlight peeking through the trees was just beautiful. It felt like another world – so peaceful and calm. It was then I realized that we were the only two white people I saw in that camp. And it didn't make any difference to anyone. That was what why we were going to Miami. To march for a free America

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	– free from war and hatred. Where we all could be at peace.
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**Karolynn Clark** graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in drama and education. She has worked for airlines and travel agencies and has taught. She returned to writing recently.

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