



**"If I ever go looking for my hearts desire again, I don't need to look any further than my own backyard!" ~Dorothy, "Wizard of OZ"**

# There's No Place Like Home

By Lou Ann Catanoso



LouAnn & Nina



Jackie



Stephanie



Sue

During my senior year in high school, 1972-73, I was surrounded by people that knew exactly what they wanted to do when they graduated. Half of the kids talked about "traveling," and the other half talked about going to college. I had no interest in either. I'm ashamed to admit it now, but I didn't like school. I cried during my grade school years, because I just wanted to be home with my mom. And the only thing that got me through the four years of high school, was gym class and playing on the basketball team, my two loves.

I stayed up every night during high school till two or three o'clock in the morning, watching old black and white movies with my mother. I basically slept through all of my classes. So, needless to say, college (more school) didn't appeal to me for at least two more years after graduation.

In Sept. of 1974 my best friend, Debbie, said to me, "I'm traveling across country; do you want to go with me?" Knowing my adventurous friend, she more than likely would have gone by herself. But for some reason the idea sparked an interest in me. We invited two other friends to go along, and started our planning. We would travel in Debbie's big old green "Rambler," and we would camp out during our trip.

The four of us had never traveled anywhere, and had surely never camped out before. We went to AAA and got our route mapped out. The travel plan would also point out where the campsites were in each city of every state we would travel through.

We decided to leave on Oct. 2nd. Stephanie's brother, Chris was lending us his tent, and he helped us do a trial run of setting it up a couple of days before we left. My dad helped us pack our supplies and gear on top of our car, and gave us some last minute advice. This meant a lot to me, as my dad had always been very protective of me growing up. It showed he really trusted me. I even heard him bragging to some of his friends (before my departure) "my daughter's traveling across country with a few of her friends." Debbie's mom, Hilda, asked us to attend mass with her the day before we left. It was very sweet; she wanted to say a couple of prayers to keep us safe.

The morning finally came for us to shove off, and I said goodbye to my mom and dad and three younger brothers. Debbie and I picked up Sue in North Wildwood, and then headed to Sea Isle City to pick up Stephanie. The four of us had all attended Wildwood Catholic High School together. Deb and I had been friends since first grade.

It was a beautiful day, but by the time we got to Western PA it was snowing. I had never seen mountains before, and it was both exciting and a little intimidating. I already felt 'far from home.' Our first stop of our trip would be in Dayton, Ohio. Angela, a friend of ours from high school, was attending the University of Dayton, and invited us to spend the night. I remember as we were driving into the city thinking, "wow this city is spotless." Later on I did find out that Dayton, Ohio was actually rated the "cleanest city in the U.S." at the time. We stayed one night and continued on down to Louisville, Kentucky. We visited "Churchill Downs," but unfortunately there were no races going on at the time.

Our first night camping out was an experience. Putting up the tent was a real test of our patience. We were literally the only ones camping out. We set up our little campfire to heat up our "Dinty Moore Stew," and also to keep us warm. The only showers they had were outside. They didn't have any roofs on them, so as we showered the snow was falling on our heads.

I had made plans to call my parents every night, person to person, and ask for myself, so they would hear my voice and know I was safe. My dad would say, "No, she's not here right now operator, can you tell me where the call is coming from?" then the operator would tell him what city I was calling from. And if we wanted to speak to each other we just would.

We made our way through St. Louis, MO; the home of the tallest man made monument, "The Gateway Arch." We also visited our country's third largest zoo while passing through the state. We continued to be the only campers at the campsites; off season I guess.



Debbie, on the morning of departure in front of Sue Starr's house at 22nd St. & the beach



Debbie & LouAnn at a campsite in Santa Fe, New Mexico



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One night while camping out in the state of Illinois we made the mistake of listening to the news on our radio before going to sleep. They talked of how three convicts had escaped from a prison near by. When we got into our tent for the night Sue and Stephanie fell asleep immediately. But Deb and I let our imagination and fear get the best of us. We both clung to each other in a death grip for two full hours staring at a shadow on the tent. It looked exactly like a man holding an axe. (Sure it did) Now mind you this shadow did not move and inch for two full hours, but that didn't matter to us. We tried unsuccessfully to wake the other two girls, but they had driven all day, and were out like lights.

Eventually we were able to come to grips with the fact that it "might" just be a shadow. We were able to wake the girls and convince them we had to pack up and leave. So, we left the campsite at 4am, and luckily that "sinister shadow" did not follow us. Sue and Steph agreed to drive again since Deb and I had not slept. She and I literally laid on top of each other across the back seat, and got a few hours of well needed sleep.

We did most of our driving during the day, stopping at a few historical landmarks in each city. We would start looking for our campsite in late afternoon, so we would be all set up before dark. I think it cost about \$4.00 a person, a night, to camp back then. Can you imagine?

Sue was missing her boyfriend Carl, and decided to fly home from Denver. She would stay one night with us there, and leave the following morning.

What a difference at the campground in Denver. It was huge, and it was packed with people in tents and campers. Exactly one week had passed since we left home. The air was cold but tolerable. The campground was like a city within itself. As weird as it may sound, I felt so close to the stars. There were millions of them and the shooting stars put on a spectacular show.

When we settled into our tent it started to rain. We had been previously warned "never to touch the inside of the tent if it started to rain." Well, I guess one of us touched it, and the flood waters came in right through the tent. Luckily the owner of the campground let us spend the night in the laundry room. Deb and I slept in two folding chairs pushed together, and Sue and Steph slept on laundry folding counters. The next morning we dropped Sue off at the airport, and we were sad to see her go.

We wanted to go further up into the mountains, but we were warned there was ten feet of snow up there and we might get stranded. We went as far as a quaint little town called 'Golden,' and headed back down. None of us had any desire to head towards California, so we headed south through Pueblo, Colorado, towards New Mexico.

As it turns out New Mexico was my favorite state. We decided to stay a few days in Santa Fe. During the day we walked through the "Old Town Square" where all the native American and Mexican shops were. We bought a few souvenirs to mail home and I got myself a turquoise cuff bracelet for seven dollars; which I still have till this day. Santa Fe is the oldest capital city in the U.S. And we also visited one of the oldest buildings in the country while we were there.

The weather was beautiful most of the time. It would be 75° one minute, but the next minute you would be pelted with hail stones. The campsite was nice, with a few other campers that we made friends with. But one night the temperature dropped so much, I believe we were in danger of freezing to death in our tent. We had double layers of clothing and socks on. We even had put plastic bags on our feet. Deb rubbed my feet for a couple of hours, which felt like they were frost bitten. When we finally could bare it no longer, we stole away into the bathroom and laid down on the floor prepared to spend the night there. To our embarrassment the owner came in and found us huddled on the floor. He was very kind and let us sleep in the activity room.

The following morning it would be T-shirt weather again, and cute jack rabbits would be running all around our campsite.

Our final destination would be our friend Jackie's dorm room at the University of Miami, in Fla. We were on our way towards Texas, and heading east. While approaching the state line checkpoint from New Mexico to Texas, we misunderstood the guards signal. We thought he waved us ahead, but he said he waved us to stop. We got the message after a few of them chased us down with their riffles. We could see the country of Mexico off in the distance, and it was tempting but we decided against it. I think we made the right choice.

As night approached, we were getting a little delirious. Somehow we made a wrong turn and started heading north instead of southeast. It was pitch black out and we were in a mountain area. I was driving and to this day I believe that the only thing that kept us 'on the road' was the deer on both sides of us. There were hundreds of them, and their eyes were glowing in the dark. I just drove right between them. By the time we saw a sign, we realized we had gone 100 miles the wrong way. We backtracked and finally saw our destination sign; but not before we went over the flooded bridge. It was still pitch black; no lights anywhere. We hadn't seen another car or any signs of civilization in hours. When we approached the flat wooden bridge we saw a very small sign that read "Beware of the Dip." Before we could even say the words, "what does that mean?" there was water coming in all sides of the car. The bridge was



Above: Stephanie, Debbie & Sue at Church Hill Downs



Left: LouAnn's niece Heather Pierce

almost completely under water. Thank God we could not see the body of water that surrounded us. We kept driving, or floating, and escaped a tragedy I'm sure.

I had been driving for almost 10 hours, and Deb did her best to keep us both awake; but I gave in and woke Steph and asked her to take over. We decided to drive straight through to Orlando Fla. where we would stay at Disney Worlds Fort Wilderness campground. It was pretty much easy driving from there on in. I actually enjoyed being behind the wheel while driving over the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. It was a 23 mile long bridge near New Orleans; one of the longest bridges in the U.S. It was a little scary when we wound up driving through the city of New Orleans at 4am though. But the homes along the gulf during the day light hours were breathtaking.

Fort Wilderness Campground was a welcome sight. The weather was beautiful. We had really gotten used to sleeping outdoors in the fresh air. We had spent just one night in a motel room in Colorado, while our tent was drying out. We felt very claustrophobic that night in the room.

At Disney we could actually sleep in our shorts. We spent a day there and proceeded to head southeast to Miami. We actually spent 4 weeks in my friends dorm room. It was day after day of basking in the sun at the beach and by the pool. And night after night of going to the clubs. But something was missing. I was becoming homesick. I missed my family, my friend Nina, and my 'hometown.'

Our little trip was coming to an end. It had been 6 weeks of fun, adventure, and some tense moments. I was starting to feel physically ill in the last week. I had been plagued by bouts of tonsillitis all my life; so it was ironic that I didn't get sick while camping

out and showering outside in the cold etc. But 4 weeks of sleeping indoors, in an air conditioned room, did me in.

I was very ill on our way back to Jersey and alerted my parents to the fact. I was feverish and actually swallowing my tonsils, they were so swollen. Between that and the thick fog that forced us to pull off the road more than once, it made for a long trip home.

Finally I arrived home to a boyfriend that was anxiously awaiting my return, and a doctors appointment with a surgeon. One week later my tonsils were removed. The doctor said I was lucky they didn't rupture during my trip, or on my way home in the car.

I spent the next few days recovering in my bedroom with the fleece tiger blanket my dad bought me, while looking at my panda bear wallpaper, and listening to my favorite music. And all along I was constantly being entertained by my little niece, Heather.

Even now, when I hear the songs, "Question 67 and 68" by Chicago, or "Dancing in the Moonlight" by King Harvest, and "Samba Pa Ti;" by Santana, it brings me right back to the comfort and safety of that bedroom.

Right outside my bedroom door was the aroma of the dinner my mom was cooking, the screams of 3 little brothers fighting in the hallway, and the barking of the family dog upon the arrival of my dad coming in from work.

All in all the cross country trip was a good experience. We were very fortunate along the way, we four young girls. Perhaps it was my father's faith in me, or Hilda's prayers that saw us through to a safe return. But in any event, as beautiful as our country is, I learned one good lesson... **"there's no place like home."**

This story is dedicated to the memory of Chris Bednarek.