

The little red Mustang

By JULIE VIGELAND
Special to East Oregonian

There have been lots of questions over the years about the little red Mustang. How could we have afforded it? Why didn't we save it? It's time for the full story of why we did what we did.

The spring of 1966 I had started graduate school, was doing my student teaching and most importantly, I was job searching. We weren't in the "poor house" but we certainly had limited funds. We were living on loans. Arranging for interviews given my full schedule was enough of a challenge but determining where I might want to teach was the key.

While we had no specific thoughts about when, we did know that at some point we wanted to start a family. And, as it turns out, that presented a problem. In Portland Public Schools, which would have been my first-choice distance wise, a teacher was told she could no longer teach once she "showed" her pregnancy. Even a bit. Contemplating adding a child without an income. That wasn't an option.

The reality of the Portland situation led me to interview outside the district. The distance was a concern. Having an old hand-me-down Opel from my parents, we harbored some doubt about the mileage needed to get to other districts. The car was in ok shape, but it guzzled gas. But the situation seemed safe enough. It was time taken for travel that had us thinking twice.

Interviews were calendared and first up was David Douglas High School. I had never been to the area so allowed plenty of travel time to get to SE 135th. Luckily, I-84 had just opened so at least there was a freeway. Although we wondered how safe that was for our old car, off I went. The interview went well, and I could hardly wait to tell Dad. I was thinking about the future. And then it happened.

My brakes gave out! I was close to home and off the freeway. A light turned red. I pressed the brake. Nothing! I tried again. Nothing. I pulled the hand-brake and managed to pull into a driveway. Luckily, it was a foreign car repair spot.

The serviceman had seen the whole thing and ran out to help. And help was needed. I was terrified. One minute

I was over the moon and the next I almost plowed into a line of cars. I received assurance and was asked who to call. My husband was on call at the hospital and there was no one. So, the nice man drove me up the hill to the apartment. Not being able to relay the story immediately, I called my parents. They were appalled and shaken. Of course, they had no idea that the brakes were worn that much. They, I'm sure, felt guilt as well as terror.

My husband came home late that evening to find me in quite a mess. Fixing the brakes, I had already learned, was going to cost money we didn't really have. Would we be able to get another loan? We were loath to borrow from our parents. I needed a car for my student teaching, school and more interviews.

The world seemed to be coming apart.

It was a restless night, and I arose early. I had arranged to borrow a car to get to the high school the next Monday, but the reality of the situation had set in big time.

Then the phone rang. It was still early, and I couldn't imagine who would be calling.

It was my paternal grandma saying "hi" in a tremulous voice. She broke down as she shared the astonishing news. My grandma, who had few resources of her own, was telling me that she wanted me to be safe. She didn't trust the car. She was sure that the next problem was on the horizon. I can hear her words to this day:

"Julie, I am giving you and Ted \$2,000 to buy a new car. Get what you can with the money but just be sure it is a safe car. I love you and want you out of harm's way."

While I remember her words exactly, I have no idea what I responded back. In one phone call the world seemed back in kilter. Our future seemed secure. There was no way to thank my grandma enough.

As luck would have it, my husband was off call, so we arranged to go car shopping that afternoon. Could we find a car in time for Monday morning?

Never having car shopped we probably weren't the savviest consumers, but we made the rounds of the various dealers. It wasn't long, though, before we fell in love. It was a little red Mustang with a black vinyl top that caught our eyes.

We returned to the Ford dealer knowing full well that we didn't have enough money for the purchase. But we had to take another look. We were smitten. Of course, the salesman could tell we had fallen hard, which wasn't the best psychology on our part.

Then, I started to relay what had happened the previous day. I was still agitated so the story was highly emotional. And that did it.

"Let's make a deal, for the little lady," was the comment. "Let's start the paperwork." We didn't even have the money in hand. I told him about my grandma's gift and the amount. We didn't have a penny more, I shared.

I really have no idea how it all was pulled off. But my grandma got the money into our account that afternoon, the papers were signed, and we could get the car the next day.

Directly from the car lot we drove to the Salem retirement home to pick up grandma for a ride. A bigger smile you've never seen. We rode for miles with her in the front seat. It wasn't the last trip in the car for her but it certainly was the most memorable.

From that day on the car did yeoman work. More interviews. A job accepted in Gresham because I had the "wheels." A trip to San Francisco with friends all crunched together. The car that held the carrier for your sister and a proud trip to Gresham to introduce her to the students and faculty. It seemed this would be a car for many years to come.

Then the news from the U.S. Army. My husband was going to be sent to Germany. Tons of decisions to be made. And the most difficult? We needed to sell the Mustang. Yes, the army would have shipped it. But it wasn't the right car for the autobahn. Service for it would have been difficult and expensive.

We held on to the last possible moment and sold it to another intern. We felt as though part of us went with that car.

Each car from then on had a part of grandma in it.

Would we? Could we? Should we have saved the car for the future? How nice that would have been. But it wasn't an option. We needed the money for our German car.

That's the story of the little red Mustang that couldn't wait for us to return.

A long drive and learning experience

By VICTORIA CROSS
Special to East Oregonian

When most immigrants picture the United States, they think of Manhattan, Las Vegas and Hollywood. Few consider Scappoose, where I eventually landed when I arrived from Russia. When my father visited me, he asked: "Where is America?"

I told him: "This is it." Like most immigrants who come to the United States, I did not drive and relied on public transportation. When I got a job in downtown Portland, I had to find a way to make the 20-mile trip each day. Eventually, someone suggested I join a carpool. It was a new concept. When my American friends asked me if we had carpools in Russia, I said we did, but called them trains.

The carpool I joined had been founded 10 years earlier. After a phone call, I was invited to join, and on the first day, I stood with my husband on St. Helens Road to wait for a red Ford to arrive and pick me up.

I was nervous when I thought about the 40-minute drive to the city. What would I talk about with these strangers? What if they didn't like me?

And then the red car stopped, and the door opened.

"Hi," the driver said, "I am Anne."

My husband suspiciously looked inside the car, kissed me goodbye and let me go. On the first day, it was just the driver and me. Anne was very talkative. Relieved, I just sat and listened. But the next day the whole team went to work, and I met the rest of my carpool.

I knew I was on probation.

The rules were simple: No smoking and you could sleep.

In this little bubble, I

ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level.

And that's why the East Oregonian will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Pendleton or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

Tom Hallman Jr., tbhbook@aol.com

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learned how to communicate, discovered what was appropriate to discuss and how to dress so people at work wouldn't take a look at my outfit and ask me if I planned to go to the opera that night.

Each day I worked on my language skills. I'd studied English in school, but it was a British version of the English language.

At first, it was difficult to communicate. I'd heard just some of the words, and because it was not my native language, I had to assume what conversation was about. But as I grew more comfortable, I started to relax. All of the carpool members were Oregonians, and some of them didn't travel much outside the state. They were curious about what I ate and where I shopped for groceries. Through these conversations we learned about each other.

In time, I learned the American version of small talk.

My buddies traveled with coffee mugs. Travel mugs were absolutely new for me. It was cool to see

people working on the streets with cups of coffee. I bought those travel mugs for my Russian friends and family as souvenirs.

This carpool was a vehicle that brought me to American culture. You can read American literature; watch movies and TV shows, but only when you can acquaint yourself with ordinary people on a regular basis does it become real.

By communicating about everyday life, you learn about the culture. I found more similarities than differences. People have the same family values and work ethics even though communication styles are different.

This carpool was a gift. I learned just by observing of my fellow carpool members. Through listening, observing and trying to adapt the new culture I learned about myself.

And then the carpool ended.

My husband and I moved, and I no longer needed a ride to the city. I moved on and started a new chapter in my life and journey.



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