

Tom Durkin: Go West, little boy

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Tom Durkin

It was 1952. We were moving to a foreign land called Kansas, and I was terrified. I was only 6, and I didn't want to leave New York, but I didn't want to get left behind either.

My best friend Johnny Upton taught me how to tie my shoes and sing "Home on the Range," essential skills for my impending diaspora westward.

My little sister and I were free-range range kids. Wynne followed me everywhere, which annoyed me very much. How was I to know that was her job since time immemorial? The little ones follow the big ones. They're genetically programmed to do that.

Actually, Wynne, a year and a half younger, and I were really tight — when we weren't fighting.

There was a "woods" on a hill across the street from where we lived. It was our favorite place to play. We dared each other to go to the top of the hill, but we never actually went all the way up because the Boogie Man lived up there. We didn't exactly know what a boogie man was, but we were terrified of finding out.

The woods were our escape from the dreary neighborhood where we lived, Shanks Village. It was an old World War II Army camp just outside New York City. The barracks had been converted into student housing for married GI Bill students at Columbia University.

The place was infested with little Baby Boomers, all under 7 years old.

Daddy was a "gradual" student. He had earned his "Mister's" degree and gotten a job at Kansas "Whispering" University.

Kansas was as flat as our kitchen table, Daddy told us. No hills.

No hills?! "How do we sled in the snow?"

We don't. It's flat as a pancake.

This was awful news!

Then the bombshell: No woods.

No woods! What kind of hellscape are you taking us to?

"Where does the Boogie Man live?" my sister asked.

Daddy flew back to Kansas. Daddy flew everywhere: New York City, Paris, Kansas City. He liked the "Sore Bone" in Paris.

Daddy flew. We drove. But first, we had to wait for the big, orange Allied Moving van. Moving men packed everything up in cardboard barrels big enough for us to hide in. All packed up, they roared off in a cloud of exhaust fumes. I thought the truck smell was pretty cool.

As soon as the truck was gone, we said our tearful good-byes. I gave Johnny the only thing we hadn't packed. My sled. "Won't be needin' that where I'm goin', pardner."

"Watch out for the buffalos, pardner."

Never saw him again.

Pregnant Mommy, Wynne, me and Figaro, our cat, got in the car. And the race was on! Off to "Geezusland." Who would get there first? Us or our furniture? (Turns out it was us, by several weeks.)

9+

I don't remember much of the trip. Did Mommy spike our Kool-Aid?

I do remember one incident from the trip. We had stopped at some roadside diner for lunch somewhere rural between New York and Are-We-There-Yet.

Figaro was left in the car again. He was not happy about being relocated. When we got back to the car, he bolted when Mommy opened the door. He had pooped in the driver's seat. It was a statement of discontent.

Years later, Mommy thought that was a funny story to tell, but she was very cross at the time. Wynne and I spent about an hour out in a cornfield yelling, "Figaro, Figaro!" A farmer watching us laughed.

I think Mommy secretly hoped we wouldn't find him, but she was a good Mommy and let us look. We didn't find him.

He came back by himself, and we drove on to Salina, Kansas, singing "Home on the Range."

Yep. Kansas was flat. But not totally. There was The Hill, where all the rich people lived. We were not rich.

It was also "hotter than hell," but we weren't allowed to say that.

Everybody did say — when I could figure out what they were saying — that I talked funny and too fast. They all wanted to know what church I belonged to. Mommy said to say we were "Piss-ca-pay-uns."

The first movie I saw in my life in New York was "Alice in Wonderland." The Cheshire Cat took up a lifelong residence in my brain. The first movie I saw in Kansas was the "Wizard of Oz." I hate that movie.

I don't think we're in New York anymore, Johnny.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

Last column, I gave you the wrong address to contact Home Path. We are a coalition of citizens working to end homelessness in Nevada County. You can write us by pressing the Message button on our Nevada County Home Path page or joining our Nevada County Home Path group page.

Tom Durkin is a freelance writer, editor and photographer in Nevada County and a member of The Union Editorial Board. He may be contacted at tjdurkin3@gmail.com.

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