

End of the Road

By Suzan L. Jackson

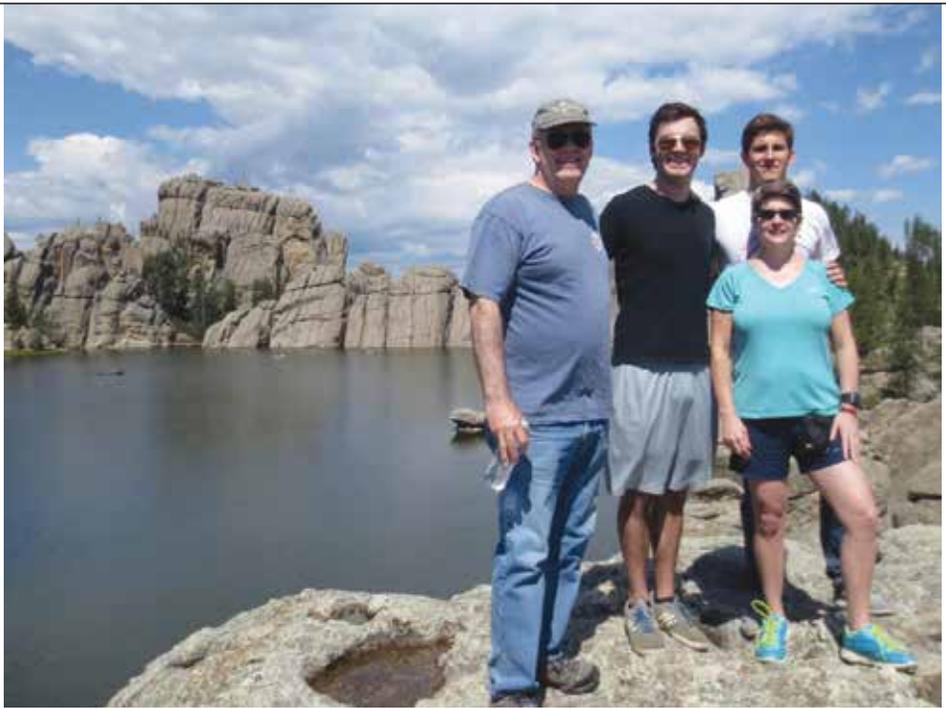
When we took our toddler and preschool-age sons on a two-week-long road trip, our friends thought we were crazy. We planned that first road trip from our home in Delaware to visit grandparents in Oklahoma, with fun stops planned along the way. We were unsure how this would work—especially when, an hour into the trip, our toddler yelled from the backseat, “All done!”

It turned out that we had a wonderful time, and our annual road trip tradition was born.

Most summers, we spent three weeks traveling cross-country, towing our pop-up camper. We planned days-long or even hour-long stops along the way—so getting there really was part of the fun.

Our road trips became epic adventures that we looked forward to all year. We visited national parks, discovered amazing state parks, and explored everything from museums to zoos to city sights. Our sons loved doing so many cool things: We dug for diamonds in Arkansas, saw mind-blowingly huge dinosaur tracks in New Mexico, stayed in a treehouse in Oregon, and slid down giant sand dunes on sleds in Colorado.

Even the long hours in the car became part of our family story. In between stops, time melted away with audiobooks, games, and special music CDs (and, later, playlists) that I made for our trip, with themes like Rivers or Tennessee or Silly Songs.



We cherished those long road trips, and we were so proud of our intrepid travelers.

Then, the unthinkable happened. On our way home from a 10-day trip to Vermont and New Hampshire when our sons were 16 and 19, they nervously told us they didn’t want to go on “long family vacations” anymore. It was too much time away from their friends, and they were too busy.

“But we were only gone 10 days!” I sputtered in shock.

It was a tough blow to my husband and me, though we did understand where they were coming from. Just fitting in that short trip among summer session at college, work schedules, and soccer practice had been a challenge.

But understanding it intellectually didn’t help my husband and me cope emotionally. We were devastated—those road trips were the highlight of our year.

We both loved that giddy feeling of pulling out of the driveway, with our self-contained world packed into our truck and camper, just the four of us together, exploring new and exciting places, living in that little bubble called vacation time, where the real world and all its challenges fade away.

Our sons now come along on a weekend trip or two each summer, and we squeezed in a weeklong vacation to the Florida Keys one Thanksgiving break. At the same time, my husband and I have

begun to venture out on our own. There are advantages to that—like more reading time—but two years later, it still feels strange to travel without them. It’s very quiet.

Lately, though, the sting of giving up our family road trips has lessened. Our sons have begun to travel with their friends, and they now want to share the places we visited. For spring break this year, our younger son (now 18) was talking to us excitedly about all the cool places he wanted to show his friends: Shenandoah, southern Louisiana, the state parks in Arkansas. “I wish we had a long enough break to drive all the way to South Dakota. They would love the Black Hills!”

We have come full circle. All those years spent driving cross-country and exploring unique places was not for nothing. It seems that while we were having fun, we were also raising adventurous travelers who are now excited to share those great places with others.

I still feel nostalgic for our long family vacations, but now I see that we have set our sons up for a lifetime of exploring the world on their own. And isn’t that what this parenting thing is all about? ■

Suzan L. Jackson is the mother of two boys (ahem, young men) and a freelance writer. Her essays and articles about family, travel, health, and more have appeared in magazines, websites, and anthologies. You can find her on Twitter at @SueBookByBook.