

PINTO PARABLES

By Terri White

My eleven and nine-year-old grandsons' knowledge of cars amazes me. While we're driving, they dazzle me as they rattle off makes and models. Me? Not so much. I don't know a suburban from an SUV or any of the differences among the sedans. And don't get me started on cowboy Cadillacs. To be fair, I know a Rolls Royce when I see it, so there's that. But a Pinto? I can spot that relic from a distance. Of course, Ford doesn't manufacture those anymore because a thing-a-ma-jig didn't work out. Boy howdy, fasten your seat belts as I regale you with tales about our Pinto adventures!

The hatchback hiccups. One December, we parked the hatchback at Steve's workplace to fly up north in a twin-engine plane piloted by our friend John, also from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. (That's another story.) Our oldest son, only six months old, never gave us a moment's trouble during our flight. It was during the gas shortage in the late '70s. John kept dipping down to find a place to gas up. Then he would swoop up again – and again. Perhaps that's why Steve turned greener by the mile?

When we returned, the rain had frozen on our windshield. In Steve's attempt to clear it off, he accidentally smashed the back window. Driving home in freezing weather from north Dallas to south Fort Worth with a baby was not my idea of joyful traveling. Life in the fast lane!

Later, when our two boys were tiny, Steve pulled out the back seat and fashioned a board to fit in that space. Topped with a foam pad, it made a tidy platform for playing and sleeping while we traveled 1,000 miles up I-35 to visit my family in Wisconsin. Even I crawled back there to rest by times. I know. I know. Gasp! No car seats. The beauty of fewer laws. The boys are in their forties now – alive and well.

Of course, I can't forget about another December trip up north. It was a balmy 70 degrees in Texas. Typically, we left at 10:00 pm so that our three littles would sleep the first half of the trip. They did – thankfully. We packed their winter jackets and sped off.

Gradually, the temps dropped as we drove farther north. When I reached for Steve's and my jackets, I came up empty-handed. With the warm weather and busyness of preparing for the trip, we left our jackets home. Imagine us tromping into an Iowa restaurant without jackets. Those looks.

Neither was our Pinto exactly toasty inside. We packed pillows next to the doors to keep out the draft. Fortunately, our friend John, the pilot, planned to fly up to Eau Claire the next day. When he arrived at my parent's house, he stuck out our coats and announced, "Dummies." Indeed.

Eventually, we graduated to a Pinto station wagon. Big time now. But it often broke down. Sometimes Steve asked me to push our Pinto down the street while he steered to magically start it. It worked every time. Don't ask me for details. Instead, ask your mechanic.

Meanwhile, our three littles stared wide-eyed out the window while we disappeared down the street. One of them called his grandma because he was sure we had vanished forever – for all of two minutes. That was not a pleasant interchange when she arrived. Oh, well.

Once our six-year-old joined me to give it the old heave-ho. Probably the highlight of his week. Maybe even the whole month.

One afternoon, I arrived to pick up Steve from work when the engine caught on fire. Now that was thrilling – if you like raising your blood pressure in unconventional ways, that is. Never a dull **Pinto-moment**.

Ask Roger Pedigo about this story. He helped extinguish the fire. Oops! Sorry, not sorry, Roger. Name dropped! Tee Hee

Perhaps Steve should have walked home instead. This is Cleburne after all. Everything's within walking distance if you're into that sort of thing. With car calamities like ours, that's a serious option.

When we moved sixteen miles out of town past the Cleburne State Park, I chose to grocery shop once a month. We only owned one car – our infamous Pinto. Or, aka, the jalopy as our kids and their friends dubbed it.

Do you know that kids nowadays are unfamiliar with the word jalopy? What a shame! I make a point to educate them. Because really?

But I digress. Back to shopping. Of course, if we made plans, we drove Steve to work more than once a month. We weren't hermits. Back to shopping.

Three growing kids need a lot of groceries. Needless to say, our Pinto station wagon was packed on those monthly trips. Just to keep us on our toes, the car broke down on Park Road 21. **Only once, though. In the blazing summer heat. With cold food. And three kids.**

Eventually, a nice elderly gentleman spotted us, who cordially delivered us and our groceries home. My father-in-law, a retired Santa Fe railroad man, towed our Pinto home and prepared to diagnose it. It stayed on its hospital bed for a season.

During that time, generous friends loaned us their van. The kids loved it! Air conditioning. Space. Luxury. Did I say air conditioning?

Because our Pinto lacked that amenity. Sigh. Our Pinto was especially challenging when we packed in several extra folks to take them to church with us. Drip dry clothes would have been nice in the '80s. We just pretended we were pioneers, trekking across the plains. Sweating it out. Pure joy. But my sarcasm is dripping – like sweat.

Pressing on to other Pinto adventures, we purchased our second Pinto station wagon in 1986. Why change, for crying out loud? It was a steal for a grand. In we piled again for our winter trek to Wisconsin in January 1987. With the back seat down, our kids - ages six, seven, and nine – stretched out with their gear to keep them occupied.

It was a great post-Christmas visit with my Wisconsin family, complete with sledding on seven bump hill. Unfortunately, though, there was surprisingly little snow that year. Quite remarkable for Wisconsin. Nevertheless, we enjoyed our stay.

When we readied to leave, we rented a U-Haul. With my parent's plan to retire to Nashville, they were lightening ship. We inherited bunk beds, the family piano, books, and other items I have long since forgotten.

On we journeyed toward home. Then a blizzard hit in Iowa. With a Pinto pulling a heavy U-Haul, it took some knuckle-gripping, heart-pounding driving to make it through. Once we reached Kansas City, we called it a day.

Perched atop a hill next to I-35 lay a motel. Not wanting to veer too far off the freeway, we opted to stay there. Up we drove. With a heavy trailer. On the snow and ice. Then we were stuck. In hindsight, it's a big duh. What else can I say?

To call a wrecker, Steve trudged up the hill. When it arrived and pulled us to the top, the driver asked where to park us. "Get us down off this hill!" I gasped. Thirty dollars later on level ground, we found another motel offering us a luxury suite for the price of a regular room. Delighted, the kids romped in the snow. The next morning we headed south again.

Finally, Oklahoma City. It, too, had received its every-ten-year share of snow. Choosing to call it a day, we eased into the motel's snow-laden parking lot. No hill this time. The kids were having the time of their lives! More snow in OK City than in Wisconsin! What's not to like? Eating out, snowball fights, sleeping in motels.

When we climbed into our Pinto the next morning, we could not get out of the parking lot with our trailer. Once again, we called a wrecker that maneuvered us onto the road.

The weather was miserable. Foreboding skies leaked snow. Hoping to not careen off the icy highway, we inched up the Arbuckle Mountains.

Upon reaching the top, the weather abruptly changed: the north side was freezing, dark, and snowy, but on the south side, the sun shined in a clear blue sky with 70-degree temps. Woohoo!

Breathing a sigh of relief, we finished our final lap to Cleburne. We pulled into our driveway, parked, and unpacked. However, when Steve prepared to return the trailer, our car would not start. That trip burned out our transmission. Time for another father-son car repair challenge.

Later, after we had moved up in the world to a minivan, our oldest son dubbed our Pinto days the "Pinto Parables". At family gatherings, our kids sometimes regale us with their versions of these tales. My daughter even claims that I hit an armadillo on purpose. Imagine that.