

The Taxing Twenties

By Terri White

It was spring of 1972. Major News Stories included the Munich Olympics Terrorist Attack, Mark Spitz's seven gold medals, introduction of the first digital watches & the first scientific hand-held calculator, Gov. George Wallace shot, the Atari release of PONG, antiwar demonstrations, the Cold War, Ireland's Bloody Sunday & Bloody Friday Northern, and the Watergate Scandal. Mostly grim news. But at age 23, life was brimming with promise for this recent college grad.

My first car – a 1965 Ford Galaxy 500. Wide bench seats, a trunk large enough to fit an elephant, and my first car loan. Cosigned by Dad, of course. With my car packed and college friend seated, Dad slipped his gas card onto my hand. Life is unpredictable; he did not want his daughter stranded between Wisconsin and Virginia. So off we sped on Memorial Day weekend.

Why, though, would a Wisconsin girl venture to Virginia for her first out-of-college job? I have no clue. No Internet in those days. To find a viable job, you hired a “head-hunter” specializing in finding jobs in your career. Job found in Lynchburg, Virginia. I flew in for an interview and was immediately hired as the head librarian of an all-black junior college. In Lynchburg, Virginia. Not exactly a hotbed of social change. Me. A radical girl from Wisconsin dropped into the middle of it. Clueless.

But I digress. I was on the road trip of a lifetime with a college buddy. My only thoughts were focused on the road. Map in hand. No GPS in those days.

We hit Indianapolis during the Indy-500. Bumper to bumper traffic. Ugh. Nevertheless, we finally emerged and headed for Ohio, our first overnight stop. Once in Columbus, we searched for the university campus. After snacking on our packed lunches, we spread our sleeping bags on the campus park benches and snoozed under the stars. Awakening to a cheery, dew-dripping morning, we parted ways. He to thumb his way to Boston and I to sail over the Appalachian Mountains.

I've always been partial to those gentle mountains. Often I would pull my car off the road, climb out, and gaze at the view. Soaking up a breathtaking Appalachian springtime. Once saited, I'd join the throng of happy vacationers.

Then it happened. My brakes petered out – in heavy Memorial Day traffic. Nothing. A 23-year old girl all alone with no brakes. Somehow, I had the presence of mind to put the car in low gear and putt-putted along, much to the chagrin of those behind me. I didn't care. I was terrified. Eventually, I eased into a full-service gas station in Charleston, West Virginia. After filling the car up with brake fluid, I spent the night in a motel. That nail-biting mountainous leg of my journey had sapped the life out of me.

Fresh the next morning, I meandered over the mountains into Lynchburg. Although exhausted from my journey, I was excited about this new chapter in my life. Head librarian! June in Virginia! What's not to love?

The campus, a group of turn-of-the-century buildings and equally decrepit houses, was nestled in the heart of the city. My salary included housing and meals. However, my boss failed to mention that housing was supplied only through the summer, and the cafeteria would not open until fall. Not a healthy boss-employee start. But I'm an optimist, so I let it go, still riding high on my enthusiasm for the job itself.

First to meet the other librarian that would work under me. We devised a plan and dug in. Weeding the collection, organizing, planning – all with door-sized windows wide open to Virginia's glorious June weather. A trifecta of buzzing bumblebees, fragrant flowers, and blissful breezes.

After a couple of weeks, though, I readied to drive to the Democratic National Convention. In Wisconsin, I had been so active in the presidential primary that the party elected me as an alternate delegate. So with a friend from Massachusetts, I sped down the highway once again – straight to Miami, the Magic City.

What a whirlwind! Student activists camped in parks while we delegates roomed in hotels. Lucky for me, I joined my parents in their hotel room. The lobbying over issues and candidates among the delegates was thick. Making deals. And my dad, head of the Wisconsin delegation, was a pro. Me? Just a baby amidst those with years of convention experience. Nonetheless, I loved the energy that filled each day. In the end, George McGovern won the presidential nomination. Now the campaign against Nixon would begin in earnest.

Back in Lynchburg, while attempting to make a post-college-life for myself, I strolled a young man from the local Democratic Party. (No doubt my dad had

called the county chairman, but he never owned up to it. He just winked and grinned.) He invited me to their next meeting at which I was promptly elected the chair of their McGovern for President campaign. Perhaps they thought that being an alternate delegate qualified me to run the campaign – me, a 23-year old. Perhaps they were desperate. I'll never know.

With the help of enthusiastic volunteers, we plowed in and canvassed the city. However, I always felt insecure, knowing that an older, more mature person should have filled my position. That older person was a black Methodist minister. Since southern Democrats were far more conservative than those from Wisconsin, he was not allowed to publicly lead in those days. In the South. In Lynchburg. So I subtly deferred to him throughout the campaign. My first dose of Lynchburg reality.

Most days, however, were filled with my responsibilities at the library. I loved it! I loved to party, too. Only about three years older than most of the students, I caved at the temptation to fraternize with the students. So party, I did. Definitely a poor choice. Definitely not acceptable for a white girl socializing with black young people. In Lynchburg. My landlord equated my passion for civil rights with his passion for the metric system. Clearly, I was a fish out of water, and I got the boot. Job lost.

Lest you think too poorly of me, all was not lost. My professional associates scooped me up and arranged an interview with the public school. They immediately hired me as an elementary school librarian in a rural district. Smack dab in the middle of tobacco country. It was grand.

My eye-opening thirty minute drive to this rural school witnessed the poverty of the area. Often children in ragged clothes carried buckets of water from a well. When the weather grew colder, they were still barefoot and without jackets. The school, recently integrated, educated the landowners' children alongside the descendants of sharecroppers. During heavy rains, busses could not traverse the low-water bridges across creeks to pick up children living in the shacks beyond. Frequent absences paid a heavy toll on their education.

While I had experienced a semester of southern, black culture at Grambling College the second semester of the junior year in college, this was a whole different dimension. But I thrived professionally.

I thoroughly enjoyed sparking a love for reading in the students. By 1972, audio-visuals, only recently available in school libraries for student use (like cassette players and microfilm), I devised a plan to incorporate them into my program. With each class's weekly visit to the library, students rotated from books to these devices to birth a love for reading. It worked. The children enjoyed their library visits and always checked out books. Because of the success of my innovative program, PBS knocked on my door and asked to film it. That was exciting!

While I flourished in my career, I floundered socially. I could not figure out how to make a life for myself outside of my career. How does a single girl find her tribe? Where does one achieve that? My political associates had faded back into their normal routines, never reaching out to me after the election. For some reason, it never occurred to me to join something – anything. Although I had learned this in college, it eluded me out in the big, wide world. I was lonely. Achingly lonely.

As a result, I returned to Wisconsin after the school year ended. Bags packed, I raced home to the comfort of old friends and a loving family. Always the late bloomer, I struggled throughout my twenties, clueless about structuring my adult life. Eventually, though, my life balanced out, and I built a good life.

Of course, then my parents breathed a sigh of relief. I'm sure they had worried about me. So here's to hope, parents. If your kids in their twenties are struggling, remember me. There is no one-size-fits-all to growing up. But there's always hope.