

“G.P. S. - 70”s Style”

Removing a quarter from my pocket I dropped it into the coin slot and dialed the operator. I then placed a “collect” call to George Alexander from George Davis. I knew he would not be present to accept the call. I had made the arrangements the night before with Margaret. I would be driving from Ohio to North Carolina. The route was all mapped out for both of us to follow. The call was simply to let her know my trip was beginning. I informed the operator it was not necessary for George to return my call. I probably would not be at that phone. Message delivered message received.

It was the summer of 1972. Telephone calls were expensive. Cell phones were not available and global positioning system, “GPS” was non existent. But we had found a way to work the system.

It was mid-day on Friday. Things were winding down for the week. I arranged to leave early with Bob, my supervisor. I had a long trip in front of me. An early departure would facilitate my trip from Lucasville, Ohio to Raleigh. I would be following U.S Highway 52 from Ohio to Charleston, West Virginia and then head south on the Turnpike and continue toward our home.

At that moment there was little actual work to do so I wasn't shirking my responsibility. I had recently accepted a position as one of the chaplains at a soon to be activated new facility. We had no residents on site. Construction workers were still removing equipment, clean up was progressing well, and our planned programs were beginning to take shape, at least on paper. We were still weeks away from being fully operational and even then with limited occupancy.

The past few days for me had been quite hectic, at times frustrating and extremely busy. Luckily it was mid summer and the late setting sun offered plenty of good day light hours. Knowing that my family, still in North Carolina, would be moving soon my first priority had been to find a place to live. Hopefully, renting was not in the picture. I consulted with several realtors and looked at a number of

houses in near by communities, keeping in mind the space we needed for our possessions and our four children, the types of schools they would be attending and the overall neighborhood where we would be living. After a couple of weeks of looking and looking and more looking; seeing little that fit my wallet and even less that really met our needs, I stopped back at Kizer's realty. Ed was already aware of my needs so we soon got down to the basics. After a few minutes Ed turns to one of his salesmen, and says, "Hey Jimmy, I think I will check with Bob and Donna. Their house is the only thing keeping their divorce from being final. They might be ready to drop the price, just to get it over with". He continued, "Why don't you take George over and show him the house. I'll talk to Bob."

Jimmy let Donna know he had a prospect who wanted to look at the house. She readily agreed and after a short wait we were touring the house at 1020 Coles Blvd. I liked what I saw. It would take some "sprucing up" but the space was great for our family, (both inside and outside), schools within walking distance, plenty of room for our possessions, not too far to good shopping areas. When Jimmy and I returned to the office, Ed had already spoken with Bob. He and Donna had agreed to lower the price. And I was the customer they had been waiting for.

In a relatively brief period of time, I signed the papers to purchase our next home, sight unseen by Margaret. I knew I was taking a gamble like never before. Now it was time to make the move.... from one house to another, from one state to another, and somehow keep everything in tact.

I had a sizable list of things I needed to accomplish....quickly. My bag was packed and the tank was full of fuel. I wasted no time departing. I had made that last minute "collect" phone call which I knew would not be accepted. The early 1970's style "G.P.S." - a road map from Rand McNally was lying on the passenger seat beside me displaying my starting point in Ohio, with other important points marked along the way. I inserted the key and cranked the engine.

After about 4 hours, non stop except to pay an occasional toll along the turnpike, I pulled into a rest area near Beckley, West Virginia. After taking advantage of their facilities, I went to a phone booth, inserted a quarter in the coin slot and dialed the operator, again informing her that I wanted to place a "collect" call to George Alexander. I gave her the number and she dialed it. After a few "rings" Margaret answered. The operator said "I have a collect call for George Alexander. Is he available to accept the call?" In her beautiful southern accent which I have always liked, she replied, "He isn't here right now. Can I take a message for him and have him return the call when he comes in?" I responded, "I'm traveling right now. I'm at the Glass House Restaurant, in Beckley, West Virginia. I will try to reach him again later." I retrieved my quarter when it dropped into the return slot. Again, message delivered and message received! I was quickly back on the road.

Margaret, in Raleigh, noted the time of the call. She opened her "G.P.S", also from Rand McNally and calculated the distance and time from Beckley to Raleigh. Our own personal "GPS" or "George Positioning System" had been updated. She knew I was traveling. Now she knew where I was, and the phone calls were free. Once back in the car, I turned the page to the location of my next phone call.

The sun was still high in the sky. It was a beautiful day and I was making great time, observing the speed limit or just a little bit over but not enough to attract attention. The foliage on the West Virginia hills in mid summer was especially lush and beautiful with variegated shades of green, unlike the first time I rode on the turnpike. That had been in the mid winter when the hills were dull, grey and leafless with occasional out cropping of jagged rocks. I recalled little mining villages of company owned look alike houses, small white churches and of course, the "company store". Not the most positive memory. But this trip was impressive. The bright summer sun highlighted the vegetation and made for an beautiful drive through the mountains.

I hadn't counted on it, but once I reached the end of the turnpike, my "GPS" was suddenly off the

map. The interstate highway system in that part of the Virginia's was nearing completion and new roads were opening. It was my good fortune to travel on a section that had been open only a few days, including going underground through a couple of newly opened tunnels, a shortcut if there ever was one. That old slow twisty-tourney road I had traveled before was a thing of the past. I calculate that I had trimmed an hour off my trip. Time for Rand-McNally to update my next "GPS".

Ahead of schedule by now I pulled into a "Flying J" truck stop near Wytheville, VA. A quick fill-up at the gas the pumps, a couple of Nabs to munch on while driving, a Pepsi to wash it down and I was ready to get back on the highway. But not before I called to see if George was available to accept a "collect" phone call.

I was soon into North Carolina. I continued past Mt. Airy or (Mayberry in Andy Griffith lore), then Winston Salem, and now Greensboro before trying to contact George again. That last call was about an hour away from my destination. Margaret had time to fix a light supper, get the kids dressed for bed and announce that dad would be home soon. That was all they needed to get excited, stay awake, and come running from their bedrooms when I stepped into the house. After we all shared our reunion for a few good minutes it was off to bed. Margaret and I enjoyed our meal and reviewed our upcoming laundry list of things to do. But those things would wait until tomorrow.

George Alexander
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Non-fiction
Willow Brook
Delaware River