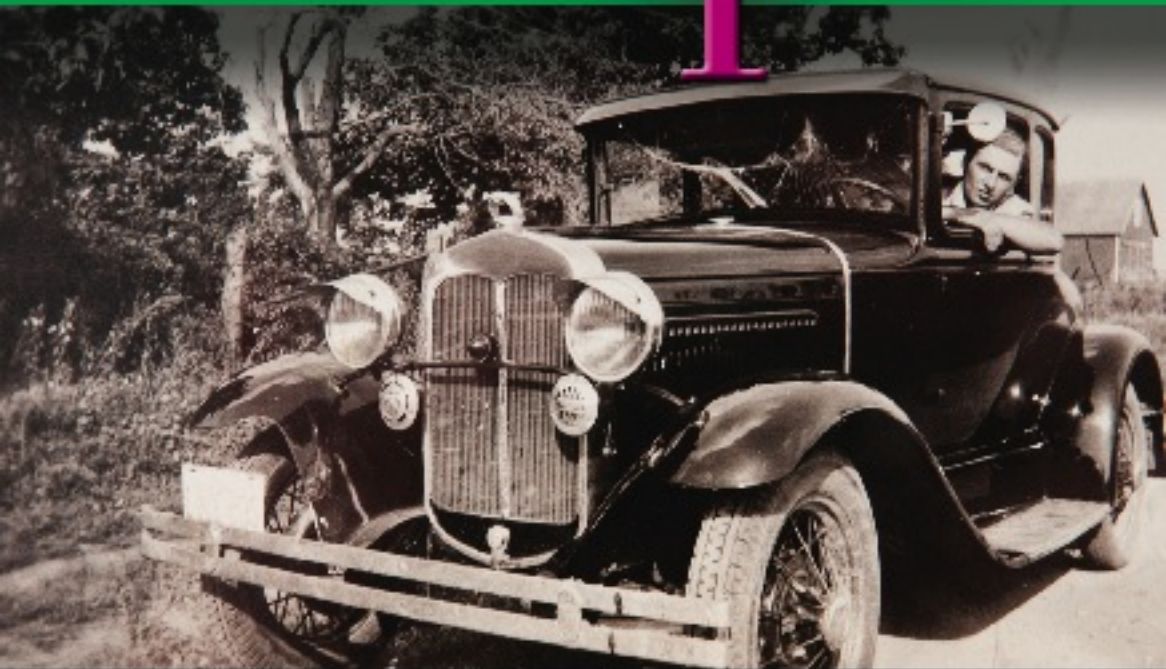
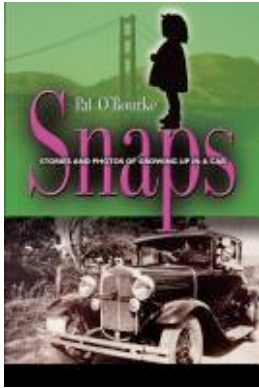


Pat O'Rourke

# Snaps

STORIES AND PHOTOS OF GROWING UP IN A CAR





*This book follows the travels of Alan and Fran...who are rather unusual parents. When their daughter was barely two, they set out in an antique, custom built Buick that had been made for hunting in the woods of Michigan, and was designed for rough-going and comfortable sleeping and camping. For the next eight years, their daughter was to have a wonderful, interesting, and extraordinary life - different friends, different schools, and a different kind of history.*

# SNAPS

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# SNAPS

**Stories and photos of growing up in a car**

Pat O'Rourke

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## Foreword

Memoirs are not usually on my "to read" list because I don't find strangers' lives, or at least the parts of them they care to reveal to readers, very interesting. So often they are celebrities who want to keep their names in the public eye and/or hope to make a few bucks. There are exceptions: individuals who have changed the world, who by the force of their personalities and their convictions have made me curious about how their experience made them resonate. But they seldom take themselves seriously enough to write an autobiography. Instead someone else who had been intrigued also has researched and brought that individual to life. I fall in neither category, nor did I ever consider writing a memoir.

It wasn't until both casual acquaintances and good friends began to urge me to make the effort that I began to consider their advice. A friend's idle question would elicit something that piqued her interest and another question, and a few more slightly unusual bits and pieces would emerge. As time passed the response became "*You should write a book about your life!*"

It never became a real project until my daughter gave me a Hallmark "family tree" product designed, I suspect, "for Mothers who are hard to buy Christmas presents for." Thinking the project a possibility, I began to consider some perspectives. My childhood is now in the "distant past" and as an oral history has value, taking place in a world so different from our twenty-first century. As a child I knew other kids had found me a little "different," but the mere fact of my being "new," having been a continent away only a week or so before, was enough to account for that: Most people then stayed in the same neighborhood all their lives. Not only was our life style different, but my parents, my father especially, were very unconventional--even by today's standards.

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The recent media and popular interest in the National Park System was another factor in my conclusion that perhaps people would find my memoir intriguing; I had spent most of my childhood camping in National Parks--in all of the Parks that existed in the thirties in fact. The final argument was a practical one. Although I had some typing skills, the thought of my attempting such a project on a regular typewriter had been daunting. But a word processor was much more appealing.

Even then there were some obstacles. I am an only child. My parents are long dead, and there is only one friend who goes way back, but not far enough because she and I only touched each other's lives because our parents were friends, and she probably knew little and remembered less about what was happening in my life until we were older and the "oddness" of my life was in the past. And as you might guess, her childhood and life were a bit unusual, too.

It would seem that my research materials are skimpy, to say the least. But my memory is very good and it comes with both snapshot and "video" capabilities. Rather to my surprise, when I began to search, I found a number of technically poor photographs, not surprising given their age and treatment. However, I am fortunate that snaps of any quality still exist and that I still have them. That there are so many is almost unbelievable since for years we carried everything we owned in a car. Before WWII we never had a fixed home. Apparently during the years we traveled, our frequent visits allowed my mother to store things in my grandmother's house in Philadelphia. After I graduated from college and then married, that household broke up. Then I moved five more times. That all entailed a lot of opportunities for losing boxes of "papers."

As I sorted through all the "snaps," I discovered that the mental pictures I had were consistent with the proof in the actual pictures. That gave me the confidence to give credence to my

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memories and allowed me to include even the most bizarre. Also my mother was a dependable source of dates, sites, and trivia in the notes she wrote on the backs of most pictures. With the data and the organizational gold mine of the snaps, the project became something I really wanted to tackle.





## 2. California

The West had been the ultimate destination for Americans and immigrants since Lewis and Clark's adventure because people knew that land and gold and abundance were there, the promised land, at the end of the journey. I know, again from photographs, that my parents were there in 1925 and 26. The car they used was an open touring car, but apparently without the sleeping arrangement of the Buick Bed. They drove out thru Texas and Utah, spent time in Los Angeles in late 1925 and were driving and camping with a tent in New England by the summer of 1926.

There was a family story about the preparations for that trip. Apparently they had bought a Franklin; before my time but I know it was a car that had a temperamental engine . They knew a whiz of a mechanic who could diagnose a problem just by listening to the engine run. If he wasn't near-by when the car broke down? Just find a phone close to the road and he could do his thing long distance! The Franklin had an air-cooled engine, evidently its design flaw for transcontinental travel. When my parents started west, the Alleghenies stood right in their path just beyond Carlyle, Pennsylvania.

The major road thru the northern states was U.S. 30. An up-dated version of U.S. 30 is still there, but the up-dated version is still tough for trucks, and cars, too, unless they have a lot of horse power. That Franklin never had a chance. The Alleghenies aren't very high but they are steep so the Franklin over-heated no matter how they coaxed and cajoled. Even the super mechanic couldn't help. Back to Philadelphia and another car built to tackle not only the Alleghenies but the Rockies as well. I don't know how long they owned *that* touring car, but by the late twenties they were living in New York City and it doesn't seem likely they kept it there. But the fabled Buick Bed, half truck--half

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sleeping arrangements, had been acquired by the time of my first transcontinental trip.

This trip started in Philadelphia in January of 1932; I had just turned two on December 27<sup>th</sup>, not a date I'd recommend. After the stops at Ft. Wayne, Denver, and overnights in Colorado Springs and passages thru places like the Spanish Peaks, we stopped for gas in Taos. From this point my mother's notes as to date and place often were expanded so they border on "An Account of Pat O'Rourke's Progress." Some of the destinations began to assume *significance!* At Taos she wrote on the back of the photo: "While Al was across the street getting gas & I was in the hotel finishing packing, Pat ran out on the street & became friends with the gang. Taos, "real" Indian country patronized by many artists."

The westering finished in Los Angeles and we soon turned north along the coast. There is a photo of a tourist cabin next to the Buick Bed, as one of mother's notations calls it, in San Luis Obispo. By the middle of March we were in Lilac Forest, Santa Cruz, and we stayed there until most of the snow melted and camping in National Parks was feasible, and then we traveled to Yosemite.

During the next seven years we camped in National Parks all over the US, but Yosemite Valley was a constant; we stayed there for as long as we could most years. That journey was the first indication of what was to be the pattern for the rest of my childhood--a stay in Yosemite Valley followed by traveling in the West, camping in National Parks a week or month at a time. During the trips we often camped beside the road.

Try to visualize a different world where most roads were rudimentary or even unpaved, where the only traffic was a local rancher or farmer, where, if you had car troubles your best friend was a passing trucker. If the weather cooperated we slept in the

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open. If it rained we made do with the Buick Bed. Tourist cabins were few and far between and usually not very appetizing; the motel chain concept remained uninvented. Generally the cooler weather signaled heading to milder places ending up in Santa Monica, California, in what I always thought was a great apartment with the best "front yard" ever devised. The next seven years we acquired lots of snapshots of campsites and views of lakes as well as the beach and ocean views.

My favorite place of all time was/is Yosemite National Park. By July 1932 we were camped in the park with a tent. Apparently the Bed wasn't adequate for long stays, so for the first time there was a tent as well as the fabulous car. Such a permanent arrangement suggests a stay of a month; even then there were limits on the length of a stay because the Valley was so popular. My father, as you might have suspected, was a little unconventional and adventuresome. There are pictures of his feeding the bears with me beside him --strictly forbidden. I remember climbing the trail up to Yosemite Falls. It's particularly vivid: the trail was rough rock, the railing two rails high designed for adults. The rock was wet in spots, and although I was holding my father's hand, I slipped and went off the trail under the lower rail. I remember that I grabbed that lower rail--and then my father had me by that arm and I was safe. There is no memory of being scared, it somehow just wasn't a problem with my father there.

Later that summer of 1932 we wandered south starting with Mariposa Big Trees just outside of Yosemite: a photograph of my mother and me standing inside the huge cleft in one of those gigantic trees. When we got to Santa Barbara, it was the time for "Old Spanish Days" in the middle of August : a parade thru the old Spanish section, banners and flags hanging everywhere. The horses and riders were flashing with silver--and the horses so elegant and beautiful. An odd memento is my silhouette by an artist working the festival.

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I know that my parents had been in Los Angeles area when they had been on the coast seven years before. That must account for the lack of many pictures this time, so only a few, just me and tourist cabins in San Luis Obispo and Los Angeles and no memories. There are several taken in La Jolla in September. Unlike most of those early memories these are not just "a snapshot" or two. These include some "videos," short and long, and some have sound effects. The place consisted of a few small cottages scattered on open land, mostly white stucco with terra cotta tile roofs.

On one large field a Mr. Brown had a string of ponies and had roped off a ring. Of course my father saw to it that I tried a pony ride, and I really liked it. Business apparently wasn't very good so I got many rides free to attract other kids. I loved the whole thing, had a favorite pony, and I tried to make him go fast. On a day trip to Tijuana I persuaded my dad to buy me a quirt--to make Keeno go even faster. My mother, who did not have the same adventurism, must have been biting her nails, but I loved it. I was never strapped in and I had fun. Since I was "two years nine months" this all sounds a bit far fetched, but my mother was writing notes on the photos again, and since this photo was an 8x10 enlargement there was lots of room:

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*Patsy and 'Keeno'*

*Brown, a Texan, used Pat as bait for his pupils who were afraid to ride. Keeno" was her favorite--would run for her--she was never strapped on. Bought a quirt in Mexico to encourage him to gallop.*

One day in October the person in charge of licenses came by and saw me without the apparatus to tie a rider in place. Not allowed! So I got back on, this time firmly strapped in. I was used to riding fast and as usual had Keeno moving pretty well, but this time the girth slipped and the saddle slid under the pony's belly--and I was attached to the saddle, hanging upside down. That part wasn't as much fun, but Keeno kept his head and I kept yelling "whoa" so it all ended safely. Of course my father made me get right back on. I didn't mind: the ride had been exciting! I kept riding until we moved on-- but never again strapped in!

Over the last several years when the PGA plays at Torrey Pines, I can see nothing that reminds me of those days. The shots from the blimps show the same old ocean and coast but no scattered small houses or large open, grassy fields with pony

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rides. But then nothing is unchanged in California--or in most other places as well. That stretch of coast from La Jolla north is very familiar since we often made the trip between San Diego and Santa Monica, but none of my mental pictures agree with the current look. I even remember the ugly oil wells, even then only pumps, no superstructures, as the old highway went through Long Beach. A few were still pumping just south of Santa Monica. But there the bay and the coastline were beautiful, and were still pretty much unchanged when I returned briefly in 1982. In 1932 it seemed like a good place to stay for the winter.

## 6. Travel, the Gypsy Life

A destination was an idea, not a priority, so a day's travel depended on what turned up; the only sure events were stops to change flat tires--and I use the plural deliberately. Tires needed tubes, tires were poor by today's standards, and increasingly hard to find. Those particular tires and wheels, narrower but larger than today's, were obsolescent by 1933. Perhaps you may have seen pictures of cars from that era, extra wheels--one on each side of the hood. If you started out the day with six tires in good repair, you were still lucky if you didn't have to stop and repair a tube or two. I have memories of on-the-spot and in-camp tube repairs; there were kits that supplied patches and glue and a tool to roughen the surface of the tube around the damage. It all took time.

There is one tube "incident" that needs no snapshot to jog my memory. Wheels, although larger in diameter, were basically the same as today's; they were kept on the axel by a number of lug nuts. These were fairly large, perhaps two inches in diameter, and were removed to take the wheel off the axel while the tube was patched. During one indelible event while I was playing in the dirt along a back road where we were parked, I buried the lugs in the sandy soil--lots of soil, only patchy dried up weeds, no identifying traces. When the time came to put the tire back on the car, no lugs. Despite serious searching, no lugs. Cars do not come with extras. My father did not believe in physical punishment, but he must have come close. Because I knew how angry he was, I realized the enormity of my actions. Even a kid three years old could understand how dependent we were on the Buick Bed: it was home! Fortunately we always carried water and some food because that day we were stranded until someone came by. There were no fences, no billboards, although Burma-Shave signs could pop up in the strangest places. Traffic on back roads was spotty to say the least. So

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there was a wait until my dad could get a lift to where someone had or could order new lugs. I was so little then that I have no way of judging the time consumed. But in that decade things like this took time. Remembering for me is seeing that day again and as I look back at that roadside, I feel the total lack not only of traffic but also of any sign of people. The road had been graded and then oiled, but it had been some time since any maintenance had been done. Eventually dad returned with the replacement lugs and we got back on our journey.

The West was still relatively young and there were lots of wide open spaces. Unless we were going to visit an important or historic site or our families, we avoided not only cities but towns, and, although "tourist cabins" did exist, places where nomads like us could stay were seldom available. And in vast mountainous areas where farming wasn't feasible, in huge National Forests or Parks and state parks, there was nothing. These were the lands we usually found ourselves in. It was beautiful country, pristine and full of wildlife.

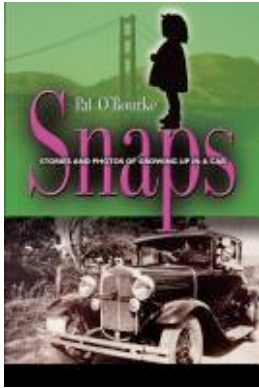
Perhaps this was an unusual life for a small child, but it was the way I lived: I was happy and I still feel nostalgia for the life. I have over the years been back to see some of those spots, but they are all very different. Even then I loved the grandeur and that is lost completely

It was all a valid learning experience. I learned to swim very young, I learned to read a road map before I could read a book, I learned to use a hatchet (an ax was too much for me to handle in those early years). Sleeping outside as we often did if the weather permitted, I learned some of the stars and the surprise of seeing the moon circle the camp as I woke different times during the night: the ground does get hard. I learned to amuse myself and to be responsible for following the rules for my own safety. Not bad skills in any life. In the Santa Monica schools, when I finally started a fairly conventional schooling late in 1936,



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I was exposed to the first great wave of “progressive” education. Now I think that what the California schools were doing in the thirties used the same approaches I had in everyday life. Perhaps some rote learning skills were skimped, but I learned the skills needed for a satisfying life.



*This book follows the travels of Alan and Fran...who are rather unusual parents. When their daughter was barely two, they set out in an antique, custom built Buick that had been made for hunting in the woods of Michigan, and was designed for rough-going and comfortable sleeping and camping. For the next eight years, their daughter was to have a wonderful, interesting, and extraordinary life - different friends, different schools, and a different kind of history.*

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