



Staff



Looking back: March/April '90

“It isn’t what happens to you that counts, but rather what you do about it.”

THOUGHTS FOR THE ROAD

By Kay Peterson #1, Escapees RV Club Co-founder and Director

You can take a ball of clay, a newspaper and a steak and, simultaneously, throw them on a campfire.

The clay will harden, the newspaper will flare up and dissipate into ash and the steak will cook into a meal. Yet all have been exposed to the exact same situation.

Given identical circumstances, some people become hard and bitter. Some come all apart and never “get it together” again. And some turn the events of their lives into wonderful adventures. Vera Wilkins was an adventurer. She was a dreamer, too—a dreamer whose favorite song was “I Believe In Miracles.”

One of her dreams was to travel to other countries. So when her husband died, leaving her a young widow, she took a job as a stewardess on a Norwegian tramp steamer. For several years, she visited and enjoyed the same ports as paying passengers.

When she returned home, she got a job driving a school bus. One icy day, the bus skidded, crashed and left her with a back injury. For therapy, she took up cycling. After she cycled through the New England countryside, she packed her bike in a box and flew to Ireland to explore the land of her ancestors.

Cruising the seas and cycling on two continents whetted her travel appetite. When she arrived home, she worked at an RV dealership until she could buy a motorhome. In it, she took off alone to Honduras, stopping for a while in a Mexican village to teach English to the children. Vera never minded taking time out to do what was needed.

Back in the States, she bought a larger motorhome for full-time RVing.

Then, in the summer of 1982, Vera learned she had colon cancer and that it was spreading throughout her body. Carrying this death sentence, she drove to the California desert to spend the winter with her LoW (Loners on Wheels) friends.

Eventually, she required a colostomy to eliminate the pain caused by the growing tumor. The disease was rapidly

taking its toll. She wanted to see her son in New York, so, against all advice, she drove there in her motorhome. She was too weak to make the return trip; so, in September of 1983, her son who lived in Arizona brought Vera and her motorhome to his home in Sierra Vista.

A letter Vera wrote to me shortly afterwards was full of hope. “A doctor here thinks there is a treatment that can give me an extra three to five years.” It was a false hope.

In early December, her friend Barbara heard that Vera was in the hospital. When Barbara arrived, she found Vera could not eat and could hardly speak. The doctor said death was a few days away.

Barbara and Vera had long planned to go to Alaska together. Vera looked straight at Barbara and whispered, “I still want to go to Alaska.”

She repeated it many times over the next few days, but no one took her seriously. Finally Barbara said, “You walk out of here and I’ll take you to Alaska.” With this new goal, Vera forced herself to eat and to get out of bed. Against all odds, 26 days later, on January 20, 1984, Vera did walk out.

February was spent in preparation. Barbara organized a three-rig caravan. A friend replaced Vera’s living room couch with a window-high bed so she could watch the scenery as Barbara drove. It wasn’t the way Vera originally planned the trip, but she adapted her dream to reality.

In March, they slowly started northward. No one knew how far they’d get, but they were on the way. On April 10, Vera was taken to a hospital in Tacoma, Washington. She told the amazed doctor, “I can’t stay long! We’re on our way to Alaska.” After 10 days, four quarts of blood and massive doses of antibiotics, the five-person caravan crossed the Canadian border.

They entered Alaska on May 4, and Vera died two weeks later. But, before she died, she saw Fairbanks, Mount McKinley and the Portage glacier.

Vera the Dreamer, Vera the Adventurer and Vera the Doer lives on in my mind as a shining example: It isn’t what happens to you that counts, but rather what you do about it. 🚐