

Gallivanting by Greyhound

VIRGINIA ROCK

L'auteure raconte le voyage qu'elle a fait avec Doris en autocar Greyhound à travers les USA sans aucun autre but que d'en goûter la saveur, les images et les légendes. Elle nous fait part des anecdotes sur leur visite de la maison de Georgia O'Keefe à Santa Fe, sur l'immensité et la grandeur du Grand Canyon et sur leurs expériences au casino de Las Vegas.

About fourteen years ago, at one of our meetings in which we drifted into casual conversation, Doris and I talked about how all of our extensive travels to countless destinations were always taken for a particular purpose—a meeting here, a speech there, a supportive presence somewhere else. We had never taken the time or found the opportunity to see and appreciate the immensity and grandeur of the United States with no purpose other than to experience the flavour of its history, images, and myths.

As an *aficionada* of bus travel, I mentioned to Doris that for a modest price, Greyhound offered a fifteen-day pass that could be used to go anywhere in the United States. Destinations, number, and length of stops were left entirely to the travellers. It was the summer of 1993. I was on sabbatical from York University, a year that afforded me the time to make planned and unplanned trips. Doris, a seasoned camper who had covered great distances with two of her sons in Europe, was intrigued by such an ad hoc mode of travel. So we agreed to join forces in this venture. In her subsequent autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*, she was clear about her expectations from this journey: “[I was] determined to see for myself how Americans actually live... I wanted to see more of the world while I was still healthy and vigorous” (270).

The discovery of a holiday letter to family and friends written in December of that year included a brief account of the trip, bringing back recollections of my memorable journey with Doris. Looking back, I realize how that unique trip set a benchmark for all my later travels alone or with other friends. But for Doris's special observations and interests I would have missed many new impressions.



The intrepid traveller prepares to board her bus in Buffalo, 1993.

After collecting maps, schedules, and Auto Club tour books, Doris and I set out on a 15-day cross-country trek by Greyhound bus on September 1, 1993. Along the way, we would choose places with tantalizing historical or cultural significance, phone ahead for motel reservations and sometimes rent a car for touring about. Doris was the driver, I the map reader and navigator. Besides being an expert intrepid driver, she proved to be a keen observer and commentator on life in America.

There was much to see and hear and taste. On the bus there was an ever-changing variety of passengers—families, sometimes a mom trying to calm a crying baby; college students, some immersed in a book; elderly persons going to visit relatives. Meal stops were at familiar greasy-spoon restaurants with bitter warmed-over coffee; at bus stations weary passengers were dragging their luggage to another platform for transfer to another bus.

As we started out, I immediately realized what a seasoned traveller Doris was when I saw her one small suitcase, the size that would fit under the seat on a plane. As the days passed, I was awed by how she managed to achieve her



Doris Anderson at the Petrified Forest. Top, Doris and Virginia Rock.

look of comfort and style with a minimum of changes.

Our point of embarkation was Buffalo. That sea-faring word choice originated with our driver's metaphorical sense of the trip. A big, burly fellow, he faced us and introduced himself, speaking directly to us in a booming voice with arms stretched to the luggage racks and legs astraddle the aisle space: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am Captain Bill; I will make this trip as pleasant and comfortable as possible for you. Our destination is Cincinnati, Ohio." Doris and I knew we were off to a promising start—at least there was a personality driving the bus for the first leg of our journey. Many hours later, we said farewell to Bill at the end of his run, before taking the next bus to Louisville, Kentucky, where we boarded an authentic 1914 stern wheel steamboat, "The Belle of Louisville," for a night cruise on the Ohio River, enjoying the sunset, Southern food, and a Dixieland band. In this region this kind of jazz music was a *leitmotif*.

In Nashville, Tennessee, we left our guides of groups behind and opted for observing and interpreting the sights ourselves. At the original Country Music Hall of Fame on Music Row we looked at the artifacts and the commemoration of country music artists, and trooped through the Grand Ole Opry House. It was a place not to be missed, even though, as Doris's son Steve later told me, country music evoked in his mother unhappy childhood memories. It was her openness to every kind of experience that made Doris such a stimulating companion. We found truth in a saying by Sheila Moss, a Southern humourist and columnist: "Whether you love [country music] or hate it, no trip to ... Nashville would be complete without a visit to the Grand Ole Opry."

Our sense of what appealed to the common people was broadened in Memphis—"home of the blues." We found the life-size sculpture of W. C. Handy, "father of the blues," in a park named in his honour. But in the Memphis of our time, we soon realized, the fame of this great folk musician had been overshadowed by the "King of Rock and Roll"—embodied in Graceland.

Doris was particularly interested in seeing this monument to Elvis. Here was the phenomenon of the worldwide drawing power of a cult figure—a white Southern rock-and-roll singer, whose songs embraced the blues and country music, tinged with gospel, bringing traditions from both sides of the colour line and introducing, in performance, something not seen before among popular country and certainly not gospel singers—a hip swiveling sexuality, making Elvis the idol of teenagers.

We were impressed by the exterior of the two-storey mansion, the home of Elvis and his family. While his parents added their touches with a vegetable garden and chicken coop, Elvis with flair and daring had the exterior painted blue and gold, glowing in the night. The home at the time of his death in 1977 was in its spectacular red period—carpets, walls, and drapes, red everywhere. This was the image that Doris and I carried with us.

The upstairs was sacrosanct: the King's inner sanctum of bedrooms—Elvis's and Lisa Marie's—a retreat separated by stairs from the rest of the world. At ground level we were escorted through the music, dining, and media rooms (special for his day with three TV sets along one wall), a billiard room, and kitchen. The Jungle Room with an indoor waterfall evoked a sense of the wild. Finally, representing what Elvis had become, we entered the trophy hall, a long room with a huge display of awards and trophies. His flamboyant personality was shown in photos, some in his spectacular sequined suits.

Finally we arrived at a shut-down Oklahoma City bus depot at 4:00 a.m. and found our luggage sitting unattended on the platform. The erratic, rude driver had disappeared. And we were exhausted.

Our concern that we might not have our reserved hotel room at that late hour was put to rest when the night clerk sent a taxi to pick us up and registered us in a posh room with a welcoming chocolate on our pillows and no charge for the lost reservation!

From Albuquerque, New Mexico, we continued on by bus to Santa Fe, the oldest capital city in North America.

The rental car, a large American model, wasn't quite to Doris's liking. After all, she preferred a small ground-hugging, sports car even if her friends back home had problems clambering into its tight back seats, a situation Doris confessed to feeling a bit guilty about.

One more stop beckoned us before we left Graceland: Doris loved cars—especially stylish sports models, and so we visited Elvis's Automobile Museum—another piece of the Elvis mosaic. Here, to Doris's delight, were his Harley Davidson motorcycles, the 1955 pink Cadillac he bought for his mother, two Stutz Blackhawks, and a 1975 Dino Ferrari, along with the red MG from his film, *Blue Hawaii*.

Leaving Graceland, we continued west, stopping briefly in Little Rock, Arkansas, where we rented a car to see Hot Springs, its waters and scenic falls. It was Labour Day with the usual crowds of people travelling—especially on buses. We should have expected that. When we returned to the station for our bus to Oklahoma City, passengers were already in a long line with luggage, boxes, and backpacks. To give ourselves more space in our seats, we put our suitcases in the hold, but when the bus pulled out, we were not on it.

A half hour later a second bus pulled in with a nervous, thin-faced, gum-chewing driver. No Captain Bill here. When I asked him what would happen to our bags if we weren't there to claim them, he spat out, "Shut up, lady, you'll get your luggage." Doris's reassuring cool voice—"some bus personnel will be there to take care of them"—restored my equilibrium. We took our favourite front right-side seats with a clear view of the driver as well as the road ahead and the countryside. Neither of us was sleepy, and soon we didn't *want* to sleep: I was focused on the driver who was behaving strangely, reaching down frequently for something (not food) in a bag on the floor beside him. After about an hour, he stopped on a dark country road, got out for a few minutes, clambered back to his seat, turned the bus around and headed back. We realized he was lost! "Do you suppose he's stoned?" Doris whispered.

Tour-guide descriptions of the political, religious, artistic, literary, and social history of Santa Fe, Taos, and the surrounding area intrigued us, while the names of famous artists who had created and lived in the region—Georgia O'Keeffe, Ansel Adams, D. H. Lawrence, and Igor Stravinsky—were an additional enticement. Wanting to see more than Santa Fe, we rented a car once we arrived there—having Taos in mind as our ultimate New Mexico destination.

"We'll miss too much if we go only to places we can walk to," Doris said. The rental car, a large American model, wasn't quite to Doris's liking according to Steve, Doris's son. After all, she preferred a small ground-hugging sports car, even if her friends back home had problems clambering into its tight back seats, a situation Doris confessed to feeling a bit guilty about. However, on this trip she was grateful to have the large car's automatic transmission to negotiate the twisting roads, the steep hills, the hairpin curves.

We both loved Santa Fe—its history, adobe architecture, and blend of cultures. Ready to explore, we headed for the heart of town, the Plaza, the centre of the original settlement, essentially intact. A cool secluded garden was an oasis amid shops and restaurants. The history museum provided perspective as we sought to get a sense of the life and essence of Santa Fe. At the northern edge, we walked through Peralta's palacio. We admired the long, low adobe structure with its massive walls, an architectural blend of Spanish and Indian design.

The character of Santa Fe is also formed by another aspect of its life—the strong presence of the Roman Catholic church. We visited a few of its many churches. The present Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi (founded in 1610) was built in 1869. Its Archbishop—J. B. Lamy, buried beneath the altar—inspired Willa Cather's

Death Comes for the Archbishop. The Loretto Chapel was another stop not to be missed for its phenomenon of a “Miraculous Staircase.” Leading to the choir loft, it featured a suspension with no visible means of support—two spiraling 360-degree turns of stairs, hanging in space, the risers not touching the floor. Doris and I circled the structure in wonder.

Paying homage to history, myth, and beauty on this trip, we had one more icon to find before leaving Santa Fe, one evoking the spirit of Georgia O’Keeffe. After her first visit to New Mexico in 1916, O’Keeffe said she was always on her way back, until she made her final home and studio near Abiquiu (some 50 miles from Santa Fe) in 1949. We looked for her presence in Santa Fe and came upon the house where she lived the last two years of her life. Entering the simply furnished, small second-floor bedroom with her paintings on the wall, looking out the window down to the expanse of garden and lawn and to distant, shadowed rolling hills, we were awed by a sense of her presence. We understood what a writer on “O’Keeffe’s Love Affair with New Mexico” meant when he said that “it is her spiritual explorations that lend her artwork its uncanny emotional power.”

We were soon driving, Doris as always at the wheel, through dramatic landscapes. Our destination was the ancient Indian village of Pueblo de Taos; built at an elevation of 7,200 feet, it remains much as it was before the Spanish Conquest. We walked through the entrance to the town, and succumbed to a bit of shopping. Doris found a handsome silver pendant and I a turquoise ring. Then we tried *pan dulce*, an Indian sweet bread made with sugar and cinnamon, to sustain us until supper, which we planned to have in the town of Taos.

Back at the plaza of Taos, we noticed a wooden sign outside the lobby door of our hotel announcing that a collection of “Forbidden Paintings” by D. H. Lawrence could be viewed there. “Forbidden paintings? Do you know about them?” Doris asked me.

“I’ve never heard of them,” I confessed.

Like other writers and artists, Lawrence had fallen under the spell of the landscape when he first came to New Mexico. He lived altogether about two years near Taos during the early 1920s. Not knowing much about Lawrence as an artist only served to make us more curious about what made these paintings “forbidden.” We paid our \$3.00 admission fee and entered a small, dingy, windowless low-ceilinged room smelling of stale cigar smoke. Doris and I were the only visitors in the room.

There, on the door, were framed photographs of Lawrence and his entourage, and a clutter of newspaper and magazine articles with background about the banned paintings. We read that they had been deemed obscene in London, confiscated by the police who would have destroyed them until Lawrence (not even in England at the time) promised to remove them, never to be returned (the ruling remains in effect today). He himself had described them (along with

his third version of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) as “scandalous,” “improper,” and “naughty.” Surrounding us, on four walls, were nine large oil paintings amidst glossy photos of famous people and prints. Doris and I moved slowly around the room, standing back to observe the composition of a work. Most of the subjects were naked or near naked, at play; many of the women were fat.

“They’re not very good, are they?” was Doris’s comment. No flattery or idealization of women here, we agreed. Would they have been forbidden, Doris and I wondered, in the late twentieth century? Perhaps it is enough that they can still be viewed, the creation of Lawrence, champion of sexual freedom in art and literature, who said of painting: “It gave me a form of pleasure that words can never give.”

Scenic and geological wonders of Arizona beckoned us from Albuquerque. Soon after entering Arizona, we arrived at the Petrified Forest National Park and the Painted Desert. Realizing we would see little from a Greyhound Bus window, we rented a car and went back to enjoy the 28-mile drive through the park. The first few miles of the road wound through the Painted Desert with its red, orange, and pink layers in soft eroded soil, along with others in blue, grey, and lavender hues. We stopped at Rainbow Forest, the area with the largest logs and most densely scattered petrified wood. A short foot-trail winding through the Giant Forest area led to some of the most impressive logs in the park—large, beautifully coloured examples, many several metres long.

Now we were ready for nature’s most astonishing creation, the destination we had projected as the *raison d’être* for our long journey—the Grand Canyon. We drove along the South Rim from Grand Canyon Village to stop and look, again and again, at the Colorado River like a thin rope from a mile above. Every view was awesome: different in colours and shadows as the sun struck the canyon walls, vast plateaus, protruding rocks in various shapes—one like a temple, sculpted by wind, rain, and snow over billions of years. We were struck dumb by this natural wonder of the world. Except for some “ooohs,” we were silent. But as we were leaving, Doris and I said at the same time, “I’ll have to come back.”

At this point we realized that 15 days were not enough to see places further west and north beckoning us. Originally our end point was to be the Grand Canyon. We thought that after seeing such inspiring beauty, we would feel a kind of closure and heading back east would be the natural thing to do. But we still had our rental car. Go back? We weren’t ready. We added four days and were on our way—still going west.

Another Arizona town we knew we had to see was a scenic gem, Sedona. We were relatively close. And from there, well, “why not go on to Las Vegas?” Doris asked. It was only a six-hour bus ride. In Las Vegas we would surely see how some Americans lived—gambling was their way of life. So we first headed for Sedona, a community of artists

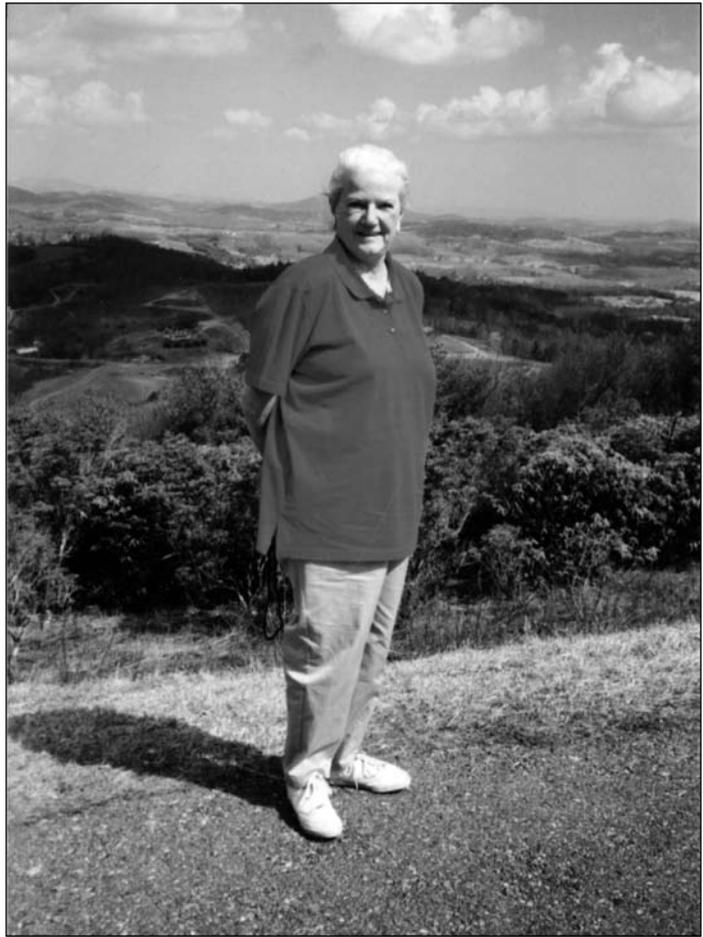
and spiritualists, nestled between massive fire-hued rocks and striped monoliths on one side and the lush gorges of Oak Creek Canyon on the other. We explored craft shops and art galleries filled with stunning creations of the local potters, painters, sculptors, and jewelers. We walked the streets, admiring the sandstone cliffs, the buttes, the giant pinnacles surrounding the town, their eroding shapes changing, taking on shades from deep red to pale sand as cloud formations passed and the intense sun shone on their facades.

We arrived in Las Vegas at 11:00 p.m., wearily claimed our luggage, and asked about our hotel's location. We couldn't believe our luck—it was across the street from the bus depot! Our room was very large and the rate very reasonable (we figured this might be a strategic policy—charge less for rooms and the client will spend more in the casinos). After flopping on our beds for a rest, we decided at midnight that we'd find something to eat, then walk through a casino or two and stroll along the Strip, getting a feel of Fun City at night.

We had no difficulty finding a café ready to serve anything from an omelet to a five-course dinner complete with wine. "Hi! how ya doin'?" the waitress asked. "Want our special pancake and sausage breakfast—or maybe a T-bone steak with mashed potatoes and gravy?" We opted for soup and sandwich, and then walked out of the café directly into a casino, our first view of what we had come to see: a kaleidoscope of light, colour, and sound—green felt-covered gambling tables with expanses of light beaming down on crap shooters; the shuffling of cards; dimly glowing slot machines lined up and crowded wherever there was a space, hunched figures clanking their levers, the lights winking, a shrill bell ringing occasionally as coins clattered out in a great rush, scooped into a paper cup by an elated shrieking player.

We had seen enough for that night. We went outside for a short stroll on the Strip, a three and a half mile stretch with all the big resort hotels brightly lit. The next day we saw the monstrous size of the classic statues of Caesar's Palace, the gigantic white turreted medieval castle named Excalibur Hotel and Casino, the huge bronze lion at the entrance of MGM. Blatantly displayed everywhere was the obvious message: "casinos are king." Gambling is not just big business, it is *the* business of Las Vegas—not that we ever thought otherwise. The contrast between the grandeur and beauty of the canyons and sandstone pinnacles of Arizona, and the glitz and glitter of the Las Vegas hotels and casinos with their flashing neon lights illuminating the Strip into daylight brightness at midnight, was the contrast between the awesomeness of nature's beauty and the transience of illusion.

The next day, after breakfast, we bit the bullet: Although neither of us had said, "I'm not going to gamble," I think we had assumed that we'd just be spectators, watch others gamble away their money—observe the reactions of winners and losers playing blackjack, roulette, poker, baccarat



Doris returns to Nevada, 1999.

or the slot machines. But we were curious. Neither of us had gambled in a casino before and the pervasive siren song of "let's have some fun" enticed us. As I recall, Doris said something like, "Well, I'm setting a limit of \$20." We headed over to the woman dispensing cups and coins. We had to decide whether we'd go for higher stakes—risking \$10 or \$5 or \$1 at a time, or if we'd be more cautious—play with quarters or dimes. We opted for quarters (they would last four times longer than dollars, we thought, and thus we might have an hour's entertainment).

Of course we hoped we would hit a jackpot—even a little one—so we'd have more coins to shove into the slot, and more chances to win. No such luck; in a half an hour we were down to our last few coins. Doris was determined; she wasn't ready to quit yet nor was I—we needed some kind of closure. We two big-time spenders collected another \$5 worth of tokens, and bleary-eyed, playing next to each other, shoved the tokens in one by one, hoping that we would turn up that row of cherries. All of a sudden it happened—the cherries rolled into view; the last one lined up with the others: a bell rang, and the clang-clang of the coins hitting the tray at the bottom signaled that I had *won*—something. "You're rich, you're rich!" Doris exclaimed. I was more skeptical—and when the tokens

were exchanged for money, I knew that once again, the truth of that aphorism “there’s a sucker born every minute” was enacted in that gargantuan mecca for Vegas visitors. I had “won” back less than half of my \$25.

It pleased Doris who some years later would talk about our experience with gambling to tell a friend that “Virginia was a big winner” and in a sense she was right. I hadn’t lost everything I had wagered; Doris had, and that, she said, made her a loser—hardly, I argued: we both were walking away from what is for many an irresistible temptation. We must have been unique: We were there for less than 24 hours, we bought no souvenirs, saw not even one big-name show, and between us we probably spent not much more than \$100! Yet we had fun gambling, we saw Americans (the majority middle-aged or older) caught up in the whirligig of Las Vegas ploys for enjoyment—smoking, eating, slurping tall drinks served by circling cocktail waitresses, sitting for hours at a poker table, or pulling slot machine levers mindlessly, night and day like programmed robots. We felt the raw pulsing vitality of a brassy, wealth-generating, and money-losing city that didn’t even exist at the turn of the twentieth century. In the end we thought Jan Morris had got it right: “In Vegas the excitement is all contrived,” she wrote; “it is the Xanadu of the second-rate.”

Our road trip west had ended. We boarded a bus headed north and east on September 16 at 8:00 p.m. Going back was a blur of highways, scenery flashing by, long dark nights when we attempted to sleep on our reclining seats, stretching our numbed legs, unhunching shoulders and uncurling bodies at rest stops. One by one we passed through Kansas City, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Cleveland, finally ending in Buffalo, New York, 19 days after we had begun our trip across the United States. We were filled with mutual images and thoughts. That I shared this liberating experience with Doris, my friend and theatre companion, a woman of warmth, courage, and a zest for life, was a blessing of good fortune.

For Doris, the insights she had gained from observing fellow travellers and from the artifacts she saw along the way were the most revealing elements of American life and culture. For me, her wit and common sense, her skeptical “take” on what was promoted as the “American way of life,” her breadth of experience and her humanity, always evident on this road trip, continue to enrich my life. In my copy of her autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*, Doris wrote:

To Virginia,
a great friend, feminist and travelling companion.
Love,
Doris

And so were you, Doris, so were you.

Virginia Rock, Professor Emerita of English and Women’s Studies, taught at York University for 27 years, committing herself

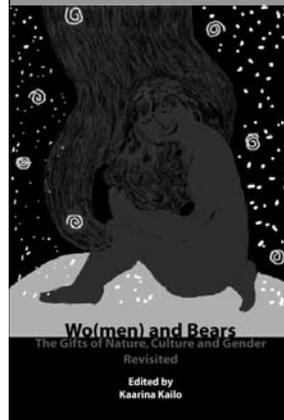
to involvement in the graduate Women’s Studies Program for more than a decade after her retirement. In 2006 she was the recipient of the Constance E. Hamilton Award presented by the City of Toronto at its annual ceremony celebrating Access, Equity and Human Rights Awards. She is continuing to travel by bus, plane and ship whenever she can.

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