

Toronto to San Francisco, 1962

Snowstorms, Stetsons, and Sunsets

By Jane Standing



Green card photos of Tim and Sarah Standing

This is how we came to America.

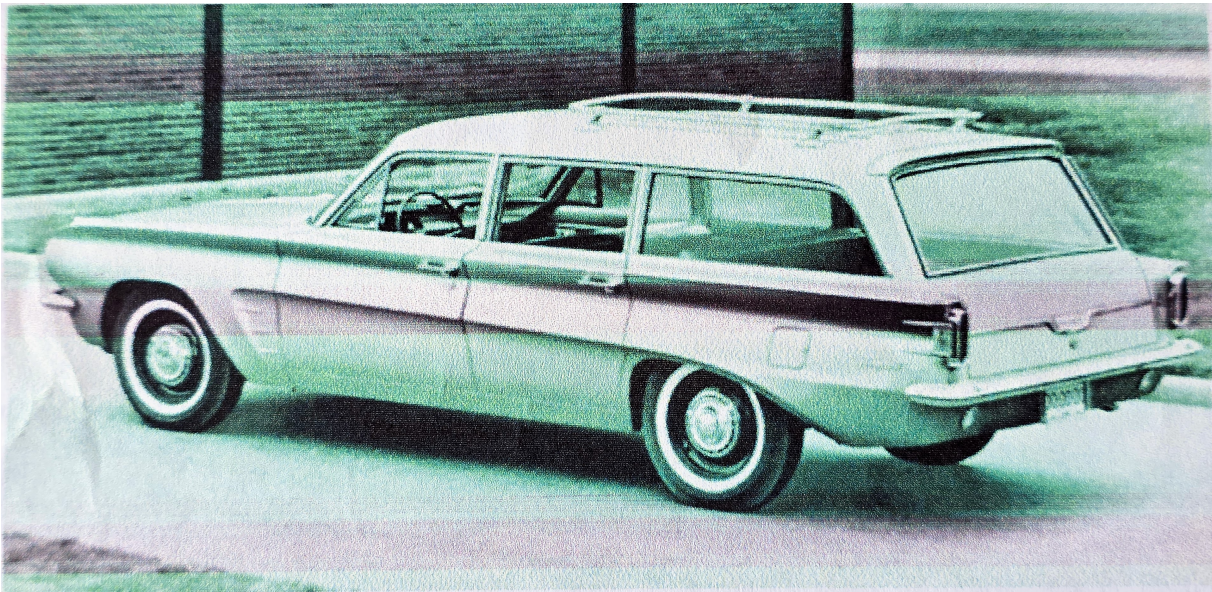
We'd been living in Toronto, enduring the intense cold of winter and sweltering summers which we didn't care for. When our children came along, it felt even harder. A friend of my husband's who'd travelled to the States, told us, "There's only one place to go: San Francisco." I'd studied America in high school. San Francisco with streets so steep they needed cable cars, the Great Lakes, and the coalfields of Pennsylvania.

We sold or gave away nearly everything. Even the crib where our daughter slept was bought from under her one Sunday afternoon. She spent her last nights in Toronto in a playpen. We'd been advised to bring only the small stuff to make us feel at home. There was still plenty to pack up.

After much preparation, we were set to leave but hit a snag. My mother needed the long version of her birth certificate from London and the wheels were grinding slowly. The poor darling waited two hours at Toronto City Hall, nearly freezing to death

before we arrived to pick her up. No cell phones to say you were running late.

We drove to Sarnia, Ontario, a border town, in our green '53 Pontiac to stay with friends we'd met on the ship coming from England four years before. Our car had almost given up so next day Barry and I crossed the border to Port Huron, returning with a new silvery-blue Pontiac Tempest with a white roof. We had no address or jobs, but wanted it financed. The dealer looked doubtful but returned smiling and said, "You've got your car."



Next day on 2/22/62 we crossed the border again, presented our papers and officially emigrated to the United States. Even the inclement weather and our daughter's cold did not stop us. We were on our way to San Francisco.

My mother was a very English. She'd been to Toronto before but thought San Francisco sounded much more appealing. The children were so good. We tried to make it an adventure for them but of course it was for us all.

My husband Barry was the only driver, and I sat next to him with maps and snacks. My mother sat in the back with our cooler, so we could make breakfasts and lunches while Tim, three and Sarah, twenty-one months played and napped in the far back of the station wagon with blankets, an old car seat and their favorite toys. There were no seatbelts or kids car seats.

back then. That night, we stopped at a motel on the outskirts of Chicago, Barry and I venturing through a complete whiteout looking for dinner. Thankfully we made it back alive with pizza in hand.

The next morning, on our way to Tulsa, we caught brilliant sunshine and blue sky but there were many trucks jackknifed at the side of the road. We drove on Route 66, heading south to avoid snow. We passed through St Louis along the river as they were building the iconic Gateway Arch.

Tulsa was sunny and warm, and we reveled in it. At a motel that evening, the manager recommended a private house that served excellent veal. We opened the door and were greeted by seven men in Stetson hats. They stared at us as if we'd come from the moon which to them, we had. But the veal was great. That night they did not have a crib for Sarah, so she slept in a bed. Cries and screams in the middle of the night. She'd fallen out of bed not hurt but frustrated as she could not climb back in. She never slept in a crib again.

We set off again, this time for Albuquerque, the land of pink and purple sunsets. We drove west across the top of Texas, stopping for our first Golden Arches hamburger. The landscape was rocky with little vegetation, and we passed signs pointing the way to the Petrified Forest.

Albuquerque was different from anything we'd experienced before. People spoke Spanish and the food was quite different. We stayed two nights as it was time for our car to have its first service. I will never forget the pink and purple mountains at sunset. On to Flagstaff which surprised us with snow! - because we were so high up.

At last, we crossed into California with its green hills rolling out like folding linen. Signs for Death Valley suggest not crossing in the summer because of the extreme high temperatures. Unbelievable as it was warm and sunny at that time. We stopped for ice cream in Barstow, then made our final push on I think route 99 through a series of sleepy towns spending our last night in Salinas so we could arrive in San Francisco fresh next morning.

The city sparkled white under a brilliant blue sky. As we rounded what I now know is Hospital Curve the city was laid out before us. There were no high rises then, just the Ferry Building and Coit Tower, standing prominent against the landscape. We found our motel in the Marina at the end of Lombard Street, with painted bougainvillea on the walls. It is still there, and Sarah stayed a few nights on her last visit.

We'd made it. Barry and I, our young children, and my mother — all of us together in this magnificent city. Time for us to settle in and make our new life here.

Theo's Comments

The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success and upward mobility through hard work and determination in the United States. An oft-repeated and essential part of this narrative is that special and particular journey to the destination where the Dream comes true.

Jane's telling of her journey is complete in itself. We have no need to enquire further. From her writing — observant, engaged and lively — we "know" that Jane's American Dream will eventually come true.

Claude's Comments

The Claude artificial intelligence (AI) program has this to say:

Here are three particularly interesting aspects of Jane's story:

1. The remarkable car financing story - Despite having no address or jobs in America, Jane and Barry managed to get financing for a new Pontiac Tempest after their old car nearly gave up. They simply crossed from Sarnia into Port Huron, and somehow convinced a car salesman to finance their purchase. The salesman initially "looked doubtful but came back smiling" - a testament to either their persuasiveness or the more trusting business culture of 1962.

2. The timing of their journey through American history - They traveled in February 1962 and witnessed America at a fascinating moment. They drove past St. Louis while the iconic Gateway Arch was still under construction, had their first

McDonald's experience (described as "Golden Arches hamburger"), and arrived in a San Francisco that had "no high rises then, just the Ferry Building and Coit Tower." They were literally driving through an America that was transforming.

3. The memorable encounter in Tulsa - When they went to a recommended private house for dinner, they opened the door to find "seven men in Stetson hats" who "stared at us as if we'd come from the moon." This perfectly captures the cultural clash of an English-Canadian family with young children suddenly finding themselves in the heart of cowboy country - yet they ended up having "a lovely evening" with excellent veal, showing how initial strangeness often gave way to American hospitality.