

Memorable Trips

Interviewer: Lara Anderson (granddaughter), 3/18/24

Lara

What family vacations did you take that stand out to you?

John C. Elsey

Well the one that stands out is a trip we took with my parents. When I was nine or ten, mom and dad took us to Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon and that was really a lot of fun. It was the first time we really traveled out of Salt Lake. I got the road map out and was checking off every town we went through. We really had a fun trip—where I began to love Zions and Bryce.

We also took some other family trips with my parents to California one time. One time we went down through the midwest—through Colorado, Durango, rode the old train. The Narrow Gauge Railroad from Durango up to Silverton. My dad was a real railroad enthusiast, so we rode the railroad and that was really a lot of fun. Went down to Texas, and I remember, well, I got really excited about these trips, and I'd get the maps out and plan for them. I told my dad, we need to go to White Sands—that was really a neat place and he said, "I don't think we got time for it." I said, "Well, we need to go." "No, I don't think so." But when we got to Texas, we met with a friend of his and he said, "You ought to go to White Sands." And dad said, "Okay." So I thought, "Wait a minute!" He wouldn't go for me, but he went for his friend. We went to White Sands and had a lot of fun playing in the sand. So we had some fun trips with my parents. They liked to take road trips and we did a number of things and that was a lot of fun.

Then with our family we'd take trips—a lot of them. I remember we rented a little—what I called the "bread truck"—it was a little recreational vehicle, RV. It was small, but we went to Death Valley in that. I would take the boys camping sometimes—took Kristin one time. Then we went to Death Valley a couple times with our kids. Went to Yosemite a couple times.

Lara

Did you guys do Half Dome?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, we did. John had been there before with the Explorers or something, so he got up on the top of Half Dome along with Mike and Kristin, and when I was coming up they said, "Hey, dad, go over there and take our picture." I went over and looked, and it's on the little peak there, so they looked like they were hanging out in space. "You kids, get off of there!" That was a fun trip. Grandma Mavis went with us, and she and Susie made it as far as Vernal Falls—no, you made it to Nevada Falls, the upper falls that went down, so that was a fun trip.

Then we rented a motorhome and went on a Family History tour. And we went as far back as New York and then back through Ohio and Nauvoo. . . Missouri.

Lara

Had you been to Nauvoo previously?

John C. Elsey

I'd been there previously. Yeah.

When I had surgery in 1974, I did a lot of walking, and I walked by a travel agency, and they showed cruises. So I talked to a travel agent, and we ended up going to the Caribbean for the first time in 1974. Had a week on the ship— went to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Saint Thomas, Santa Domingo, and Haiti and back, and then we spent a week in Florida— drove out to the Everglades. But we, I thought it'd be fun—I'd always liked national parks, so they were fun to go to. And so we drove out to the Everglades, and got out of the car and as long as we were out of the trees, it was okay, but if we walked into the trees, mosquitoes just bogged on the back. And so we got out of there and into the car and drove to the visitor's center and as soon as we turned the car off, the windshield was covered with mosquitoes, so we didn't even get out of the car, just drove away. I said, "I'm not mosquito bait."

Then we had a lot of family reunions starting in '89. For some reason we just felt we'd like to do that. We tried going down the coast but we couldn't really find—I remember Grandma and I spent a day going down the coast checking out different places, and we couldn't really find a place we liked, so we ended up going up into the mountains to Lake Arrowhead area—got a place there and in 1989, we had our first one, and I think we had three or four there at Lake Arrowhead and then somebody suggested that—I think it was Kim Elsey—we ought to try Fish Lake. They had a big house that we could rent. So, we spent several summers at Fish Lake. And then someone suggested Bear Lake, and so we had several at Bear Lake. A lot of fun—all the family there. Trouble getting a big house where we could accommodate everybody.

Lara

Did you have any vacations that you would not repeat?

John C. Elsey

I don't know that we would ever go back again, but we enjoyed every one.

After one of our reunions, we drove to Canada and stayed at Banff, went up to Calgary, from Banff up to Jasper. And those were really, really beautiful drives between Banff and Jasper. The mountains—we got on the glacier—trip on a little, a big. . . I don't know what you'd call it? A bus, I guess. It had big wheels. Anyways, drove out onto the glacier, and we got out, stood on the ice and stuff.

Lara

Are there any places that you haven't gone that you wanted to make it to? Because you have traveled quite a bit.

John C. Elsey

Yeah, we have. We've been to every state in the Union, I think, except maybe, Mississippi and maybe Alabama. Although I've been to Alabama on business. So, I think we've been in almost every state in the Union. We took a trip to New York one time. Spent two or three days in Manhattan. Grandma had always heard that it was lots of crime and you'd get mugged in New York, so we were a little concerned about that. Typically, when we walked she would say, "Slow down because I can't keep up with you. My legs are too short, and you're going too fast." So we got into New York in the evening and we thought, "Well, let's go to the hotel." And it was too late to go to a show, so we just thought we'd walk around a bit. So we asked the connoisseur there if it was safe, and he said, "Oh yeah, as long as you keep going and know where you're going." So, we stepped down the hotel and Grandma took off like a shot. She was going so fast. I said, "Slow down! Stop!" She said, "We gotta keep going. We gotta go fast!" And I said, "Come on! Slow down!" And she said, "No, we gotta go. We gotta go fast!" We walked pretty fast through some parts of Manhattan.

Then we drove up through New England—spent some time in Boston where I'd gone to school at MIT—spent a Sunday at the old church where we had been. And then we drove through the countryside and enjoyed the fall foliage. It was in the fall of the year. Fall is very pretty in New England. We had a good time there.

Lara

Let's talk about your cruises. One of your cruises was like six weeks long, wasn't it?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, we first were in the Caribbean like we mentioned, and then we also had a time on the Mississippi river on a paddle boat, the Delphi Queen. That was about a week on there.

Let's see, we had another after I retired. We had another trip in the Caribbean on a smaller ship but went to the outer islands and some of the smaller ones. It was a small ship.

And then, we had a long cruise from San Diego down around the west coast of Mexico, Central America, South America and around Cape Horn.

Always wondered what it was like to go around Cape Horn and it wasn't bad. It was cold. Yeah, somewhat, and the waves were not that big but we plowed right through on the big cruise ship. And went up to Buenos Aires, Paraguay and up to Brazil. Rio de Janeiro is where we got off the ship. That was the long seven week one, probably five weeks—35 days,

Lara

Did you have any favorite stops on that cruise?

John C. Elsey

There were several of them where we were supposed to see penguins, but we only got— I think it was in Chili, southern Chili, where we went out and saw some penguins in the water. The other place we were supposed to was the Falkland Islands, but the weather on the way was so heavy there that they couldn't get ashore.

We were supposed to anchor off and then use a little tender boat to get to the shore. But the waves were high and the water was so rough, they really couldn't launch the tender boats. Yeah, so we didn't get to get off the ship at the Falkland Islands.

And then we did a cruise in Alaska. That was a great time. We really enjoyed that one. We took a plane to Anchorage and took the train up to the Denali National Park. It was about a day on the bus through the park then another bus up to Fairbanks. Good days in Fairbanks. Panning for gold—we got a little bit of gold. . . a necklace. Then we flew to () city. Spent a couple of days there and was back then on the ship. We sailed through the inner passage to see Vancouver.

Lara

Are there any cruises that you've repeated because you liked them so much?

John C. Elsey

No, we always like to go to new places. We went to Switzerland in 2017. I always like to tell the story, the first dinner we had there, they had all the tour group going to tour, and they had the 40 of us for dinner. Everybody introduced themselves and it came to be our turn, and I said, "When I turned 80, Mavis had given me a surprise birthday party that was beyond all belief— 100 guests in a neighbor's backyard, food, musical program, displays. . . It was really something. Anyway, I said I could never duplicate that and asked what she wanted to do when she turned 80 and she said, "Well, I've never been to Switzerland. It would be nice to hear a concert in Vienna. So that's why we're here."

So, all the rest of that trip, they were saying, "Happy Birthday, Mavis! Happy Birthday!" And gave her some little things. We completed that trip from Zurich through the Alps and Austria. We went to Rome. We spent three days there.

Saw the Vatican and all the other stuff. Anyway, heavy rain. Hadn't been there for a long time, but we had a real rain storm when we were there, but we got around okay. Then we cruised on the Western Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar.

Saw a lot of interesting stuff to me on that one—the rock and they had lots of tunnels and fortifications. The Spanish, I think, would like to have control of it, but the people there have voted when they've been given the chance to stay with the British.

Lara

What took you guys to Russia? You just visited there, right? You didn't actually teach over there?

John C. Elsey

No, we taught in China. We went to Russia afterward.

Lara

Why did you guys want to teach in China?

John C. Elsey

Grandma didn't. She didn't want to teach in China. For some reason, I just read in the Church News that English teachers were wanted—needed—in China. It was a BYU-China teachers program, sponsored by BYU—at least facilitated by them. The Church wanted to have some kind of presence in China, and you can't do proselyting or anything. So they said well, we want a presence, so we'll send teachers over to teach English. So they've been doing that for years, and it just seemed like a fun thing to do, and so we did. We applied, and grandma went kicking and screaming across the pacific, but she did really, really well. And then when we got back and reported afterward— she said she had a very spiritual experience before we went that indicated she should go, but she didn't tell me that till after we got back a year later.

But when we were in China, we were there for a year, we traveled all over the country. It was really good. We had, well, from the west we went to Tibet. Rode camels in the Gobi desert. I saw the yurts where the people were living. We went to all the places that China was offering tours to the people that would take the BYU teachers. They would collect them and have different tours throughout the country. We were with another couple who were quite adventurous. They wanted to take the train from Beijing. China to Moscow, Russia and then continue around the world.

We weren't sure if we wanted to, but we did, and I'm really glad we did. The train from Beijing, China across Russia was six days on a train to Moscow. And then we, at Moscow, took a train up to St. Petersburg, spending a few days in each place. We took a bus from St. Petersburg to Helsinki, Finland. And then the ferry, which is like a big cruise ship from Helsinki over to Stockholm, Sweden. Then the train from Stockholm to Copenhagen and down to Germany. We spent a couple days in Hamburg, took a side trip to Berlin and Luxembourg, then took the train under the English Channel. That was around the world.

Lara

What year was that?

John C. Elsey

We went to China in 2003. Spent about 10 months at the University there teaching English.

Lara

Thinking back on the many places you visited, what were you most surprised by? Was there anything that you just were not expecting?

John C. Elsey

In China, we had an apartment on the campus provided by the university and it had air conditioning, heating, and a western toilet. The eastern toilet was just a hole in the ground.

Lara

Was there anything that you learned from any of the different cultures you visited?

John C. Elsey

I can't think of any one thing, but, of all the experiences and talking with people, generally people were really nice and accommodating. And I came away with the feeling that we're really all the same. I mean, the US right now is somewhat at odds with China, but the Chinese people that we met were just really nice and had the same hopes and desires that we do: love for their family and their kids and just wanted to live a peaceful life. People throughout the world are the same. In Europe, everyone we met there were nice and good.

Lara

What took you to Israel?

John C. Elsey

Well, when I retired, we determined that we could travel, and I said, "If we're going to go, I want to go to Israel." So we did. We contacted Murdock Travel and arranged to go with a tour group there and went, I think, for 17 days or something like that. Flew from Chicago to Israel. That was memorable. Spent a few days traveling around the sea Galilee and other places. Went down to the Dead Sea. We didn't have much time, but we did get in the Dead Sea and floated a bit. Went to Masada and then back to Jerusalem. The most memorable thing there to me was going to the Garden Tomb where they think Christ may have been buried and resurrected. Well, that was the most memorable.

Another trip we took was with Jack Lucas and his wife Elna. They traveled all over the world. I think their goal was to get to 100 countries, and I think they ended up with 134. They're both gone now. But In 2002, I think it was, we went with them to England. We started in London, went down to the south over to Ireland, North Ireland back to Wales and Scotland and back. So we were, I think, 28 days on that trip. It was a fun trip on the British Isles. I was surprised. We drove a lot through the country, and I was surprised at all of the sheep on the hillsides. And there were often castles up on the hill. They built the castles up on top, I guess, for fortification or whatever. So you could drive along on the bus and see the green field, the sheep and the castle up in the distance.