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Stuckey and the bus

By Janet Steele Holloway

*Early summer, 1952,
Sarah Ann, West Virginia*

The first time I hid on Stuckey's bus, I was about 11. I'd gotten the idea while sitting on the metal railing of a concrete bridge — the one that led from Granny's place to the large bottom area she'd purchased from the Hatfields.

Sitting on the railing, doing nothing on this particular day, I listened to the sounds of the rocky creek below and watched the crows circling the narrow road that cut through the steep mountains ahead. That road was the only way in or out of Sarah Ann, where we lived then. Wearing my cut-off shorts and T-shirt, I was bored, killing time, skipping stones across the narrow, burping creek.

A Trailways bus approached the bend in the road, coming from across the mountain with folks from Williamson and Harlan, Ky., and, as it went by, several passengers turned to look out the window at me, doing nothing.

As the Trailways passed the next curve, I suddenly envisioned myself on that bus, looking out at the world, not just being seen. Immediately, a plan formed in my head — a plan that involved the local bus line and Stuckey the driver.

Three times a day, Stuckey drove the local bus up Route 119 through the coal-mining towns of Switzer and Omar and turned around outside Granny's place of business, The Pioneer Beer Garden. It was the end of the line for the local bus, and Stuckey always took a short break for coffee and gossip with the locals —

who were usually drinking beer at the bar, no matter the time of day.

On a day when he was fully engaged in conversation, I saw my chance. I slipped out Granny's back door and went around the front side of the parked vehicle, not wanting to be seen. The door of the bus was open to let in any breeze, and I scrunched down between seats in the back, sweating from the summer heat and the fear of being caught. I waited quite a few minutes before Stuckey came out — him never thinking to look in the back of the bus.

He turned the key and moved onto the road. After a while — just long enough so it'd be difficult for him to stop, put me off, and tell me to "git on home" — I stood up and walked casually down the aisle toward the front, hands tapping the backs of the seats as I moved. The large rear view mirror reflected shock on Stuckey's wide, sunburned face when he saw me, and he started to brake but had no shoulder to pull over on.

"What the hell," he gasped, as his face turned redder and perspiration settled above his upper lip.

"What are you doing here, child?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to go to town."

"How did you get on? I didn't see you." He wiped his face on his sleeve and bent down to look me in the eye through the rear view mirror, as if he weren't sure I was actually there, on his bus.

"You were inside," I shrugged. "I just snuck on."

"Your grandmother is going to kill you... and me!"

He nodded for me to sit down as we rounded another curve.

I stumbled onto the front seat, from

where I could see everything, and, for several minutes, Stuckey said nothing. He'd just look over, shake his head, and look back at the road again. I could see people going about their daily lives: hanging laundry, working on cars, rocking babies on front porches, leaning against the old movie theater, smoking cigarettes. They passed quickly in front of my eyes, giving me a strange feeling of being there but not there.

So this was what traveling was like!

Stuckey drove six or eight miles to Switzer before stopping at Andy and Stella's grocery store to call Granny and tell her of my whereabouts. I stayed on the bus and wondered how the conversation was going. I also didn't want to explain myself to Granny's sister, Stella.

When Stuckey came out, he handed me a soda pop and said, "You're gonna get it when you get home, young lady."

"I don't care," I replied carelessly, enjoying the sting of the Coca Cola and feeling quite sure of myself. Where did this confidence come from? I didn't think Granny would be too mad. She might even be proud of me. I was like her. I got up and did things I wanted to do.

From up high on the bus, familiar sites took on a different perspective. Having the front seat, I could see just about everything, and everything looked smaller, almost like those little villages my friends' mothers would put on the mantles at Christmastime. The porches where school friends and I played during the school year were dusty gray and lifeless in the summer

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heat. Someone had drawn a big heart with an arrow through it on the soot-covered company store window. The two mannequins sported the same outfits they'd worn all summer and both looked tired of it. A group of boys sat along the railroad tracks, smoking and flicking cigarette butts. A hunched-over old man swept the dirt in front of the tiny post office. I opened the window next to me and stuck my head out, loving the breeze that whipped my face and turned my sweaty hair into wild curls.

I was going somewhere! By myself!

I didn't hear the 3 o'clock whistle as we passed the coal tippie because Stuckey was hitting the horn and waving to the men leaving work.

"Hey, how're you doing?"

White eyes and pink mouths emerged from black, coal-dusted faces as they returned his greeting. The men, who had worked the 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift, all looked the same to me, just like my dad when he came home from the mines and headed to the basement to shower. Mom wouldn't let him in the house until he had cleaned himself up downstairs.

What is it like, I wondered, to work down in the mines? Do these men recognize each other underneath that black dust? What do they talk about? Do they crawl on their bellies like my dad told me? And what was this thing about not allowing women to go beyond the face of the mine? Some kind of superstition, I'd heard.

Stuckey and I didn't talk much; he had the radio going. The music was high-lonesome, Hank Williams songs I was familiar with from Granny's juke box-and Stuckey hummed along, turning from time to time to look at me and shake his head. He did ask about school and I told him it was good; I liked it. I played with the straw in my Coke, tying it in knots as I looked around, hoping to see someone I knew and could wave to. It occurred to me the high wires along the electric poles from Chauncey to Micco, from Switzer to Monaville, were like threads I could follow if I ever got lost.

We passed a coal tippie that had been shut down. Nobody there. Just slate, ash and smoke on one side, and empty, run-down houses across the road.

"Blow the horn when we go under

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the train bridge," I told Stuckey. "I like that sound."

He held down the horn until we came out the other side, shifting his shoulders from side to side and yelling, "Whoooo, whooo!"

I stomped my feet and we both laughed.

No one flagged the bus on the whole trip to town.

Once in Logan, Stuckey pulled the bus into the station that stood across from the electric company. He parked without effort alongside the other buses, took the metal box from the meter, and told me to come inside. While he turned in his fares and chatted with other drivers, I sat on a stool, twirling around behind the counter where people bought tickets, watching them come and go, and taking small bites of the tootsie roll one of the drivers had given me. From time to time, the other drivers looked my way and tipped their caps. I imagined Stuckey had told them about me slipping on the bus.

The man at the counter asked if I knew how to make change. I nodded eagerly.

"I help my granny out in her business all the time."

"Anybody buying a ticket for West Hamlin — that's the next bus out— tell 'em it's \$1.15 and give 'em change. You know how to do that, young lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be right back. Any problems, tell 'em to wait."

Only one customer came to the window while he was gone; she wanted to cash a money order, so I told her she'd have to wait for the dispatcher.

Meanwhile, I wondered about order-

ing money and how that worked.

After a half-hour or so, Stuckey told me to, "Get on a stick," and I hurried to the restroom before the trip home.

He had me board ahead of the other passengers so I could get the front seat and he could keep an eye on me. A few people, none of whom I knew, got on — one, a young girl with a crying baby, went all the way to the back and sat by herself, jiggling the baby up and down and staring out the window. An old couple sat together and I noticed the man carried a tin can which he spat into from time to time. A sleepy high school boy slouched down, pulled his cap over his eyes, crossed his arms, and, apparently, fell asleep.

The trip back to Sarah Ann went quickly. Nobody talked; the baby stopped crying. The old couple pulled the cord and got off in lower Switzer; the girl and baby, in Omar; and, just as we rounded the curve in Crystal Block, the sleepy boy yelled, "Stop here."

Stuckey slowed to a stop on the nearest shoulder, and the boy jumped off the top step, almost falling into a ditch covered with mulberry bushes and stray purple wildflowers.

"Are you nervous?" Stuckey asked, as we neared the Pioneer. "Your granny's going to whip your butt."

"No, she won't," I held out. "She knows I like to travel."

As I look back at those days, I still feel the excitement of going somewhere on my own, not asking for permission, feeling bold and courageous. Just like the time before my husband and I divorced. I wanted to escape the winter and the fear and confusion of that time. Without consulting anyone, I booked a trip to Mexico, all on my own. This required the same kind of forced confidence I needed to get on Stuckey's bus, and I was rewarded with a new sense of confidence, knowing I had the ability to survive on my own.

Even in a strange place. I would do fine by myself.



A 1959 graduate of Logan High School, Janet Steele Holloway writes with affection about the coal camps and the mountains in her recently published memoir, "A Willful Child." She

graduated Marshall University in 1963.
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