n a June morning 66 years ago, two young women, Thelma Popp and Doris Roy, both 21 years old and from Buffalo, New York, left on a remarkable journey through the eastern and southern U.S. that began on bicycles, segue’d to a Mississippi River barge, and ended with hitching rides with long-haul truckers.

When the pair returned home to Buffalo in early September of that year, they were determined that together they’d write a complete chronicle of their adventures, and completed Part 1 of what would become the book *The Lure of the Open Road*, said Thelma Popp Jones (married to Gordon Jones soon after her returning home in 1944) in Part 2 of the book. “That came to a halt as we pursued our jobs, married, and raised our families,” said Thelma. It wasn’t until 2007 that her grandson, Mike Gradziel, a mechanical engineer in California, published the book on his website.

But it wasn’t until she was in her 80s that Thelma picked up the storyline on July 17, 1944, where the initial account written with Doris left off, just as the pair were about to embark down the Ohio River to Cairo, Illinois, where the river joins the great Mississippi for the journey down to New Orleans. The two young women were not unlike that original river vagabond Huck Finn, especially in their spirit of adventure and discovery.

“As I reread the original manuscript, the energy and vitality of our youth emerges,” wrote Thelma. “Now that I am in my 80s, my format has changed, and my words flow in a different manner, the manner of one who has lived a full and rich life. I hope to convey in Part 2 the excitement and happiness of the greatest adventure of my youth and to recount the rest of the journey.”

The journey began at 7:30 a.m. on June 22, 1944, when the Roy and Popp families gathered at the Popp residence at 134 Oakgrove Avenue in Buffalo to see their respective daughters off on their great adventure. Both girls had recently graduated from college — Doris from Michigan State and Thelma from Buffalo State College — and both had already shared many rich outdoor experiences together as Girl Scouts.

“We admired Mark Twain’s adventures, had read his *Life on the Mississippi*, and sought to follow his path to the Midwest,” the pair wrote in the introduction to Part 1 of their account.

Although their parents were still trying halfheartedly to discourage them, their folks wouldn’t stand in their way and perhaps could not have stopped them from going if they wanted to, given their ages. Still, the willingness to let their daughters go “hoboing through the country to live as we pleased and go where we will,” as Doris and Thelma put it, seems pretty remarkable for the time, and the mood of that breakfast was upbeat and supportive. “Every extremity was used as a carrier,” wrote the pair. “The usual ruck over the rear wheel was extended to hold the weight of a sleeping bag and duffle, and below, saddle bags bulged on either side of the wheels. Strapped to the handlebars was a wicker basket outfitted with oil cloth for protection against inclement weather. These were our bicycles — carnivals on wheels!”

As Doris and Thelma rolled down the driveway to begin their great adventure, Thelma’s father filmed the event on his movie camera. One of the mothers called out, “Keep dry and wear your hats!”

“Down over the rough brick pavement, up the viaduct, and over the freight yards we pumped and sweated,” wrote Thelma and Doris. “The outskirts of the city were an endless line of malls and factories belching smoke and soot. The odor of the chemicals stung our nostrils and dried our throats. We were glad to leave the city.”

Amen, sister, and thank God for the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, right? But the truth is, once they were past those nightmarish factories, Thelma and Doris rode into an America that was far more pastoral and infinitely less crowded than the America of today. They were headed for Pittsburgh.

“Could we have chosen more mountainous country?” they wrote. “Unsought we rolled out of the city south to the Appalachians. The highway was broad now. Factories, trolley cars, and houses were left behind. Before we lay the world, the world of waving grasses, scorching sun, hills for a bed and two months of an unfettered vagabondish life. We were to be the transient neighbors of all who lived by the side of the road.”

That first night the girls were welcomed onto the property of a family living in a small grey house, where a young girl greeted them with a broad smile, and her parents directed them to a small clearing “bounded by trees” on their property, complete with a shallow stream and picturesque waterfall nearby. They were, however, plagued by mosquitoes during the night.

“The moon was out, and in its light I could see a horde of mosquitoes walking up and down the netting in dizzy design, testing the size of each hole,” wrote Thelma. “One found a sizable opening to venture through where I had ruffled the cover. Others followed and then began the bombardment that sent me diving head and all into the sleeping bag. I could hear their droning and imagined the battle that might ensue if I let as much as my nose protrude.”

The girls kept careful accounts and for that first day recorded the bikes, were blue and their chrome fittings shine like silver in the sun.”

The bikes, wartime Victory models, had received thorough checkups with all the parts oiled and “geared for efficiency,” although Doris’s bike had only two speeds and Thelma’s had but one. The bikes were also specially adapted to the journey ahead. “Every extremity was used as a carrier,” wrote the pair. “The usual rack over the rear wheel was extended to hold the weight of a sleeping bag and duffle, and below, saddle bags bulged on either side of the wheels. Strapped to the handlebars was a wicker basket outfitted with oil cloth for protection against inclement weather. These were our bicycles — carnivals on wheels!”

“Out on the driveway were standing two beautiful new bicyc-
"In the afternoon we found ourselves in Chautauqua County, in one of the largest and most beautiful grape belts in America," wrote Thelma and Doris. "The day was such a lovely one, the Mayfield Parish type with lots of blue. A lazy wind pulsed the clouds along above the sloped vineyards. The sky was blue and the road was level. Vineyards stretched their way over the slopes at our left, and at our right they marched in straight columns to the blue lake."

Outside of Westfield, New York, the girls slept in the first of many barns that would give them not only shelter but an insight into the Jeffersonian ideal of small independent farmers that still dominated the American scene in 1944. There was a storm approaching as they headed toward Lake Erie to try to find a camping spot, and they came across an idyllic farm instead.

"To meet our specifications exactly," they wrote, "a huge red barn with a prosperous hayloft and a pump next to the house."

John Parson, the farmer, emerged from the barn as if on cue, carrying a basket of freshly laid eggs. "Certainly you girls can stay in the barn for the night," said Parson, "as long as you don't use matches."

The pair woke up the next morning, dry and secure in their refuge from the storm, to the scratching and cackling of chickens.

"The room opposite us was alive with noises," Thelma wrote. "The rooster crowed and from within came the whirring and flapping of wings of a hundred chickens. The barn was still dark and the rain was beating on the roof. Daylight soon came and with it the fleasy rays of sunlight. I watched the little flocks of dust revolve around the beam of sunshine that streamed through the broken pane. The slightest movement of the hay and puffs of dust danced up the beam, spun around, and came to rest again. We did not emerge from our beds until late in the morning and then lazily put on our slacks and sweat shirts."

Hitting the road again, the pair made the 18 miles to the Pennsylvania border and that night stayed at Johnny Phillips' farm in the northeast corner of the state.

"Bars, we decided through two nights' experiences, were the best places to roll out our sleeping bags," Thelma wrote. "Consequently, at sundown we rolled up to a red brick farmhouse and asked permission. This time it was granted by a young man, Johnny Phillips. Our mattress for this night was to be allafa, freshly mown and sweet-smelling. I climbed into the tractor parked at the barn door, intending to write the day's journey in my log, when Johnny came whistling down the path. He stopped to pull off a cluster of cherries and tossed some to us."

Johnny wouldn't be the last young man to take an interest in the young, lean girls riding their bikes across the countryside, but never did the pair have the kind of trouble that seems to appear all too often in today's headlines.

"Now over 50 years later, as we read the news and watch the television reports of abductions that take place today we won- der. Were we courageous or just naive? Or was it our outlook, our spirit, the happiness we exuded that carried us along in safety? We really never considered that anything formidable would happen to us," wrote Thelma.

By this time, the pair were mostly hitching rides with long-haul truckers, across the south to Florida and eventually back up the East Coast to their home in Buffalo and the end of their journey. It was an approach that certainly would be considered risky today for two young women.

Mike Gradziel said his grandmother loves to tell stories of her remarkable jour- ney, and he said he often heard of "the fabled bicycle trip" as a boy and found the tales of exploration enticing.

Mike continued, "My grandmother's stories of bicycling through the country- side, meeting the people and seeing the landscape, always struck a chord with my own desire to set out and discover new places out West and beyond."

And Gradziel has had adventures of his own, descending the Connecticut River by canoe and exploring arctic Canada, Peru, and Bolivia, far western China, and East Africa.

Thelma and Doris remained friends throughout their lives. Both became school- teachers and both continued to travel with their husbands and families.

"Thelma and Gordon, now in their late 80s, still live in New York," said Gradziel. "In the last few years they have traveled through parts of Europe, packed up their belongings from their home on nine acres of rolling hills and fields, and moved into a comfortable retirement community where they entertain frequent visits from family and provide a life of luxury for Tinkerbell the cat."

Sounds like the kind of contentment that comes to those who are determined never to say, "I always wanted to but never did."