

Nov. 16, 2003----

INDIANAPOLIS -- When push comes to shove, there may be no better expert on American wanderlust than Merle Haggard. The country music warrior is sitting in his "Silver Chief" tour bus parked behind a dance hall somewhere on the west side of Indianapolis. The huge saloon used to be a bowling alley, and Haggard is on a roll.

He has led a life of somewheres.

The lines in Haggard's face look like a road map of Indiana, taken from a forgotten glove compartment and unfolded. He will go anywhere that will have him. I've seen him sing in a smoky roadhouse somewhere in the middle of a Taylorville, Ill., soybean field, and I've heard him hum somewhere in the highfalutin wineries of Saratoga, Calif.

He settles into the front sofa of his bus and begins talking about the move his parents, James and Flossie Haggard, made in 1935 from eastern Oklahoma to Oildale, Calif., near Bakersfield. (Haggard was born in Bakersfield on April 6, 1937.)

This migration is a major thread in the new permanent transportation exhibition "America on the Move," which opens Saturday at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, 14th and Constitution N.W. in Washington, D.C. With floor space of nearly 26,000 square feet, it will be the largest single exhibition at the museum.

"America on the Move" takes roadies on a journey along Route 66, including a chance to walk along 40 feet of Route 66's original 1932 pavement. The Smithsonian acquired these ten 9,300-pound concrete slabs from the Oklahoma Department of Transportation.

Although Route 66 is the thrust of the exhibition, "America on the Move" also includes 19 sections with more than a dozen vignettes featuring museum collections in historic settings. These chestnuts include a 1903 open air Winton Touring Car (the first automobile to cross America) set in the wilds of Wyoming, a 1955 Ford Country Squire station wagon and a 1959 CTA transit car (both set in 1960s Chicago) and a 1970's California Highway Patrol motorcycle on I-10, something I'm sure Haggard has seen before. In 1966 Haggard had his first number one song with "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive," and in it he sang:

"...I'm on the run/the highway is my home....."

"Mobility a touchstone in people's lives," says Dr. Janet Davidson, historian and curator for the "America on the Move" exhibition. "We all have the experience of traveling, even if it is just commuting in your daily life rather than migrating a long distance. Everybody's family has a history of it."

Yet, it is a tall order to bring the wide open world of travel into a museum setting. If you want to see Route 66, why not just get in a car and hit the road? "That is a challenge," Davidson says. "We wanted to make the show feel like you were going on a journey and moving. Of course all the things are in a building in Washington, D.C. We've done a lot of work in creating a soundscape, murals and putting cast figures of people in appropriate clothing."

Haggard and his sister Lillian Haggard Hoge donated nearly 30 objects the family saved from their migration. Lillian was 14 when the family left Oklahoma with her late brother James Lowell. "My family was of more fortunate nature than most," Haggard says in measured tones. "They didn't come to California for the same reasons as others. They had a fire and got wiped out. They were doing all right in Oklahoma, as hard as the times were."

James and Flossie Haggard were farmers, but the fire destroyed the barn, a 1933 Model A Ford, cows, horses, and feed and seed grains. To compound matters, a 1934 drought starved the Oklahoma plains and the family made no money from crops. "In those days, insurance wasn't around," Haggard says. "So they decided to go out to California to see if it was actually 'The Promised Land.' They told me about the trip.

"They said it took them seven days to go from Checotah, Okla. south of Muskogee to Oildale. They had been out there before. They went in 1927, I believe, and the roads weren't even blacktopped. They crossed the desert on railroad ties. Sometimes the sand would blow across and you'd lose the road altogether. In 1935 my dad drove a 1926 Chevy and they had everything they owned in the cargo trailer. There was a guy with a bicycle climbing this long hill. My family had stopped for water. My dad said to the bike rider, 'Hey, throw that bicycle on top of the trailer.' And the guy hung on the side of the car on what they called a running board in those days. Dad took him up that hill. And after he got him up that hill, he got the bike and rode along the back while holding onto the trailer. He pulled him nearly all the way to California."

The journey was full of surprises and self-reliance.

Haggard recalls, "My dad lost his transmission just as they started to cross the Colorado river in Needles Calif.. I remember him telling me how he worked on it all afternoon. Some bolts had broke. He used wire from a nearby fence to wire it together. They left that night to start across the desert because it was so hot. And it was still 114 degrees at midnight in Needles."

Once the Haggard family arrived in Oildale, they moved into their new home: an abandoned refrigerated railroad boxcar. James Haggard remodeled the boxcar into a home, adding windows and indoor plumbing. Flossie Haggard planted flowers in the front yard. The entire Haggard family of four found work on a dairy, milking -- by hand -- 40 Holstein cows. They were paid \$50 per month.

According to the book *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (Oxford University Press, \$15.95 paperback) during the 1930s Dust Bowl migration, more than 300,000 people used Route 66 to leave their homes to find work in California. However, less than 8 percent of those who left for California stayed there.

Haggard family objects to be displayed in "America on the Move" include:

- * An Empire camera. This type of small "all metal box" camera made for the Emmerling and Richert Co. of Berlin, Germany, was popular in the 1930s. Flossie Haggard used the camera to document her family's move to California. Her snapshots depict their 1926 Chevy, the cargo trailer and scenes from Route 66.

- * A metal trunk that held the Haggard family's possessions during their journey.

- * A metal and glass kerosene lamp (patented in 1895), which was used to light the Haggards' tiny living room in Oildale.

Additional Haggard family objects donated to the museum include:

- * Presidential powers: In 1916 James Haggard bought his wife a 16-by-16-inch silk scarf bearing an image of President Woodrow Wilson at the Muskogee, Okla., state fair.

- * Bedding: Flossie Haggard made colorful quilts and coverlets for her family. Objects donated to the museum include a log cabin-patterned quilt and butterfly-patterned quilt that belonged to Lillian.

- * Gospel songbooks: James Haggard sang bass in a gospel quartet and owned the songbooks *Celestial Joys* (published in 1932) and *Leading Light* (published in 1935).

"Along this reconstruction of Route 66, they will place artifacts and people's belongings," Haggard explains. "My sister went out of her way to give them some of my mother's personal things. It is quite nice for our family that these things will be in the Smithsonian forever."

The Haggards aren't the only Route 66 icons to be championed in "America on the Move." Recognition is given to the unforgettable Lucille Hamons (*Detours*, Sept. 3, 2000), who ran Lucille's Service Station for nearly 60 years on old Route

66 in Hydro, Okla., outside of Oklahoma City. The "Mother of the Mother Road" died in August 2000 at the age of 85.

Lucille was barely 5 feet tall, yet she operated a gas station-general store-diner-bar from 1941 until her death from a stroke. The gas station was built by Oklahoma bank robber Carl Ditmore in 1927, less than a year after Route 66 was commissioned. Lucille was a real rooter-tooter, and when I met her in 1991 she was still bragging that she had the coldest bottled beer in the state. She insisted I have one. It was 10:30 a.m. A framed picture of me and Lucille sits in my home library near framed photos of Carl Sandburg, Studs Terkel and Frank Lloyd Wright.

That's what she meant to me.