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## Hollywood hick

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My WORD

I quavered behind the too-tall podium in front of the class, grasping my report as if it were holding me up instead of the other way around. "Hollywood," I began, "the movie capital of the world." My West Virginia drawl hung in the air like gnats on a humid day. The California kids stared my words down as they floated and then sank to the bottom of the podium and stuck there along with ancient chewing gum.

After all, the Beverly Hillbillies was just a TV show. Real people didn't pick up all their belongings and move from a tiny Appalachian town to the West Coast. Or, did they?

Our 1965 Chevrolet Impala convertible, which my mom bought one cold December day on a whim, and which we christened by riding around town with the top down, was packed to the rafters. My two sisters and I scrunched up in the back seat, and my mom and grandmother sat up front, my mom driving. The trunk rode about 5 inches from the ground under the weight of our worldly possessions.

Even at the age of 13, the irony of the situation wasn't completely lost on me. Historically, many had traveled west to fulfill new dreams or to escape broken ones. For my mom, the route was littered with the shards of life gone bad. We were moving to California to begin a new life. Most of my dreams were young enough so that they quietly shattered and no one heard.

I soon realized what it feels like to teeter at the edge of the Earth. I missed being surrounded by hills and mountains. They had enveloped me like a big grandma shawl and protected me from outside harm. Now, if I wasn't careful, I might walk right into the cold Pacific Ocean and right off the face of the Earth.

But California wasn't all bad. I discovered a place that sold 31 flavors of ice cream. That was 28 more than the Dairy Queen served back home.

Still, I was embarrassed by my accent. I tried hard to re-form my words as I presented my report. The harder I tried, the more I slipped up. The room became unbearably hot and stuffy. I could no longer concentrate. I tried to read the words on the page, but everything was a blur. Then blackness.

"Do you know where you're from? Do you know your name?" A woman in a white nurse's uniform was standing over me asking these questions as I lay on the floor.

"Hollywood," I said. "The movie capital of the world."

"She's Elly Mae Clampett," someone said. "Just moved here from West Virginia."

I heard laughter as the blood oozed out of my head like bubbling crude.

**Memo:** Susan Long lives in Winter Park. This is dedicated to the many children dislocated by Hurricane Katrina. Let's make sure we embrace their uniqueness.

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