

Nourishing My Roots

I've packed everything I can see so we should be ready. Oh, it's gonna be a good trip to my roots. The water is shut off, the computer is shut down, we bow our heads in prayer, then roll out of our driveway.

Friday, September 13, 2013 at 11:56AM and the wheels are rolling. Whoo Hoo! My Forreston class of '61 was small (46 kids total) and they have the usual reunions every five years. However, in between, the gals gather to party. This year the bash is called "Turning Seventy" and they have rented a cabin at The Pines, a local state park in Illinois. They don't suspect that I am hoping (if Amtrak cooperates) to join them.

A stop at Roanoke, VA, cures "the hongries", then the little red Cavalier aims for a rendezvous with the Cardinal (Amtrak 51) at Clifton Forge.

The little town of Clifton Forge is peaceful with huge (and I do mean huge) baskets of brilliant red begonias gracing every light pole. Amtrak 51 is about 20 minutes behind schedule so we cool our jets and chat with folks at the C&O Heritage Center. We meet a couple from Roanoke who are embarking on their first ever train trip, heading for Salt Lake City.



4:35PM and we are rolling westward in Coach Number 25004. Let 'er rip – Chicago, batten your hatches.



We rock and roll through the New River Gorge as the sun sneaks behind tree-shrouded mountains and backlights a massive cloud. Again, I see rocks as big as mobile homes in this gorgeous river. But we just keep rumbling along into the setting sun, enjoying the little blonde sweetie behind us as she hums a happy song. Life is good!

At Prince, WV we glide to a stop and see that the Chessie Kitty emblem is still embedded in the station floor.



Soon we pass through Stretcher's Neck Tunnel, the eleventh and last tunnel between Clifton Forge and Chicago.

It is still barely daylight as we pass through historic Thurmond and the usual bevy of photographers is snapping away as we wave. This is fun. We are generally the ones behind the cameras.



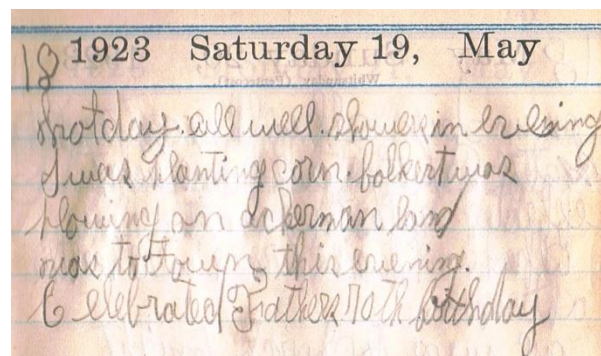
The little blonde and her mom are now singing “Jesus Loves Me” and all is well as darkness slides into place around us. We are now forty-five minutes behind schedule.

The mighty New River Bridge (876 feet above the river) soars above us and is silhouetted in the last pink rays of dusk.



We rattle along in a channel of pinkish darkness between the river and mountains. An occasional bonfire along the river bank hints of campers enjoying one last hurrah of summer. Flanges squeal their protest as our chariot of steel snakes its way along this path.

I have my Uncle Hilvin’s 1923 diary along and see his May 19th entry. The family was celebrating Grampa Saaijenga’s 70th birthday. Tonight, a bit over 90 years later, we are heading for a “Turning 70” party. OK, don’t you just know, I’m a push-over for family history.



Now the sky is ink-black, the kids behind us have fallen asleep and we settle in for the duration. But first, Jim goes after some coffee to go with our cereal-and-peanut bars. Yum!

We are finally out of the gorge and pass by a string of little towns. Houses glow as residents hunker down for the night – probably watching their favorite TV shows and munching some

popcorn. Oh, yes, one house is already decked out for Halloween and orange lights brighten the windows and front porch. (I'm betting they make their house pretty for Christmas too, huh?)

Nine PM and we continue through Charleston. The Capitol dome is striking, all gold and highlighted by flood bulbs.



We pull to a stop beneath a beautifully lit bridge as passengers disembark.

The gal beside us tells of her travel woes. She was on her way home from a funeral in Philadelphia, developed a severe nose bleed and EMTs took her off the train in Washington DC. Can you imagine how stressful that would be, having to be taken off the train? After being in an emergency room all night, she found her way onto this train and she is anxious to get home to her husband at Calumet City, Indiana.

Huntington, WV is where passengers can step off the train for a few minutes to smoke and it looks like lightning bugs blinking in the dark along with iPads, iPods, iPhones and cell phones glowing. We've made up 20 minutes now. The pillows and blanket we brought along will be put to good use.

Consciousness rises to the top and we find ourselves coming into Cincinnati. This city has to be the most beautiful one I know in the dark. Oh, all the buildings are lit and so many bridges cross this Ohio River. The glass-smooth river reflects a kazillion lights. Larry and Ellen live in this town but, for some reason, they are not here to wave at us.....maybe because it is 1:45 AM. See how they are?

Again, we are moving through miles of factories and warehouses. I wonder about the people inside them. Are they happy? What is going on in their lives? Is their cat's name Tinkerbelle? I need sleep.

The locomotive's mournful whistle wails through the night, warning away any vehicle in its path. We are in farming country now and vapor lights dot the darkness. Small towns zip by my window, each berg with its farm implement dealer and lumber yard and churches and fire department. For 55 1/2 years farming was the fabric of my life.



I'm a city slicker now but my heart still cherishes those rural roots.

5 AM and Indianapolis slides into view with its many modern buildings, many emblazoned with famous logos: Lilly, Rolls Royce, Anthem. We pull under the station and pretty much sit for an hour as two coaches are added to our caravan of glass and steel. Lucas Oil Stadium, home of the Indianapolis Colts, is beside us....but we can't hear any cheering.

6 AM and we begin the 196 mile dash for Chicago. Eighty-seven more people have boarded and our car is chock-full. Between Indy and Chicago another 142 people will climb onboard with us. Every seat on this train will be taken by the time we reach our destination. They have a sell-out crowd this morning.

At long last daylight opens our view of this wonderful world. Jim remarks, "This sure isn't Virginia". The eastern sky is pink, not a cloud is visible. Cornfields and soybeans stretch to the horizon. Grain bins and elevator legs reach toward the heavens. Mist is rising above the fields and my heart is grinning.

North of Lafayette are acres and acres of wind turbines, churning out the power to give the farmers the ability to dry all these crops. I have to wonder if light bulbs that are powered by

winds generate a breeze so customers no longer need ceiling fans. Yup, I didn't get enough sleep; the loopy factor is evident.

Our chariot stops at Rensselaer, Indiana and my mind kicks into memory mode, allowing me to relive a trip here to visit the Odle family. They were such good people. I spoke with Ronnie's wife a few years ago and it is hard to imagine him as a grampa. The years have flown by but the memories stand fast. The picture below is of him at a 1982 snowmobile race in Alexandria, Minnesota.



Hot diggity! We are in Dyer, IN and only a few minutes behind schedule. Only 29 miles to go. The prognosis is good! It is hard to sit still. The hair is combed, the war paint (lipstick) is applied and the pillows and blanket are tamed into one big pillow case.

Munster, Indiana flashes by my window and I think of sweet Bev Snyder who grew up in this area.



Now we crawl past one long parade of tidy homes. OK, cars parked in driveways sport Illinois plates so we are getting pretty close to the station. Randy is on our cell phone, checking on our status.

Ten AM and we are easing into the end of our jaunt. It's been a good, good trip.

Randy is on deck, we wheel through the maze of downtown Chicago, then shoot southwest to Interstate 88. NOTHING looks familiar. A call to Carol Coy tells me the gals still have no idea I will possibly crash their party. What fun!

Cruising out of Chicago we spot a mushroom-shaped cloud on the western horizon. Can it be the Byron Nuclear Plant? Yup! Randy says the mushroom cloud hovering over the site is scary.

Score!!! We drive up to the cabin at The Pines and totally surprise my classmates.



Oh, it feels so good to touch hearts again. Faye and Alice are telling jokes. (Faye keeps forgetting an important part of the story and that makes it even funnier. Twice she messes up the same story and we are all laughing until the tears flow.)



The memories are so sweet...almost as sweet as each of the gals at this party.

All too soon Randy is at the door. My, how time flies when you are immersed in the joy of happy times. My two hours were not enough!

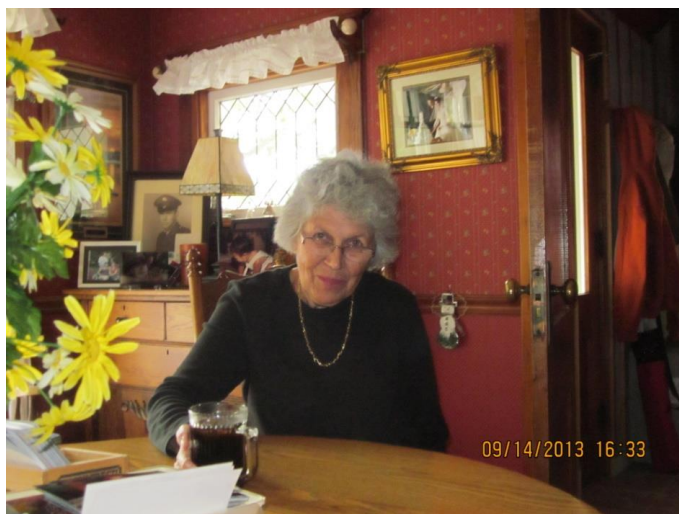
Below left to right, back row: Barb DeVries Zuspan, Luann Moring Walton, Rose Marie Buttell Thompson, Aljean Frisbie Webb and Shirley Kilker Vietmeier. Front: Denise DeGraff Lane, me, Faye Smith Bailey and Judy Ross Greenfield.



Before we part we join hands around a table for a group hug, then Alice and Barb lead us in devotions. Not a dry eye in that cabin. I leave behind a red plastic canvas heart magnet for each of them as a reminder that my heart is always with them.

Randy and Jim tell me about their visit to President Reagan's boyhood home in Dixon, IL. Hmmm! I lived in Illinois 57 years and never saw that place...how did Jim rate that treat?

Next stop: our precious Donna Cornelius.



We sit at her table and sip soda and bask in the tranquility of her home. It even smells like love. I still want to take her back to Virginia with us! Two heart magnets stay at her house.

Carol Coy isn't home from work yet but I give her hubby Larry a hug to give her...and a couple more of those heart magnets.

We tool up Route 26, then pass "The Farm" on Florence Road.



My mind is seeing five little kids beside the mailbox, each with a dinner bucket, waiting for the school bus.



Those days are long gone but the memories reside within me.

We take the back road to Freeport; the places along our way seem vaguely familiar but are no longer a part of my world. They seem more like something out of a dream than reality.

At Randy and Monica's home things are at full-throttle. Isaac (7) and Miranda (8) are normal little kids and they keep us laughing with their antics.



Somehow Amelia (15) has grown into a young lady. How in the world did that happen?



In my mind she is still that little kid who loved to cuddle. The kids pick out their favorite plastic canvas butterfly wall-hangings plus a few more of those red heart magnets.



Grilled brats and corn on the cob is the fare for tonight and it hits the spot.

Sunday is spent just being family.



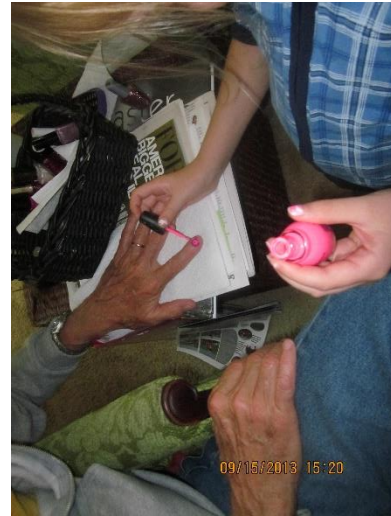
That picture behind Randy hung on the wall in my parents' home for 48 years...makes me feel warm all over just looking at it.



Amelia is gone to Color Guard practice and Miranda hauls out her stash of nail polish. My fingernails are aglow with purple glitter..with white French tips yet! Oh, and my toenails become grass green with purple polka dots.



Very uptown for this old grandma. Jim escapes with just one hot-pink fingernail.



Later, Amelia offers to loan me her nail polish remover but I decline. Hey, these beauties will explain to folks back home that we've been to visit a 7-year-old granddaughter. How fun is that????

Luke still runs this place. He was rescued a couple of years ago from an animal shelter and he is a good match for this family. Jim threatens to tuck him into our suitcase. That's Luke below with Jim:



Monday morning and the Faist family rolls out to school and jobs as Jim remarks that being 70 has its advantages over chaos. At mid-morning the spiffy red Jeep arrives with cousins Sylvia Suess Hillman (and Sylv's wonderful hubby Bill) and June Suess Kelly.



Jim and Bill give up trying to get a word in as we three gals open our hearts. The next six hours become Super Glue as we chat and remember. Oh, man, the stuff we remember! June and Sylvia have brought pictures and I have old diaries and family documents to peruse. Randy arrives home early and kindly scans all the “new” pictures. We clutch the DVDs in our hot little hands.

In past years the Saaijenga girls (Dena, Bertha, Rosie and Hattie) often spent time during visits sharing cups of tea.



Sylvia remembers that they had such a look of utter contentment and we three decide it is time to duplicate that tradition. Daughter-in-law Monica has graciously provided a fancy tray of dainty china cups, a pretty teapot and boxes of flavored tea. Yes, we are in high style...even crooking our pinkies.



Bill is game to try the tea but Jim sticks and both pass on the dainty cups...coffee mugs for them!

with coffee



The fellows snap pictures for family history and we are all happy campers.

I shed tears as the red Jeep drifts down the shaded driveway. They are such “keepers”. Oh, yeahhh, and more heart magnets go home with them. The hand-made embroidered rooster doily (made by Sylvia and Bill) stays with us.

Isaac has soccer practice tonight and you can hear his happy giggles clear across the field.



Parents and grandparents shiver in the cold wind on the sidelines.



Those little kids all have red cheeks and are all pretty much pooped out by the end of the session.

Early Tuesday morning is a blur of kids and oatmeal and laughter. Suddenly they are all gone and the house is quiet except for the sounds of laundry. I sit here and let this home seep into my core. Jim is busy catching up with his Facebook messages on the laptop computer.

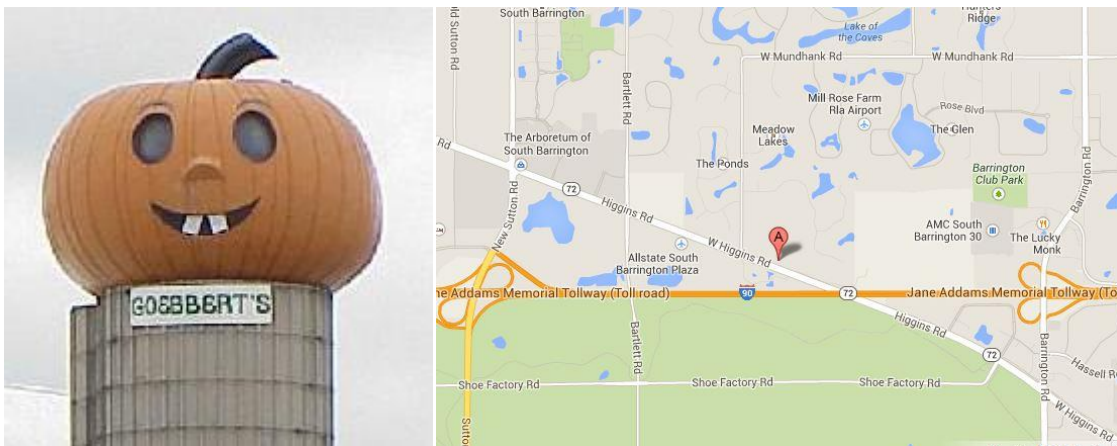
Randy arrives home and we snarf down sandwiches and chips, then negotiate construction woes on Interstate 90 from the Illinois line to Elgin at 45 miles an hour. What a zoo! I look for my pal Zac Lauer among the construction workers, but, honestly, I've not seen him for about

18 years so I would not recognize him if he stepped on my left foot. But he is somewhere among all this heavy equipment and it feels so good to know he is here.



Ah, construction ends at the Elgin toll booth and traffic snaps. About the only thing familiar are the names on the water towers. I am a tourist and a foreigner now in what was once my home state. Fifteen years ago this would have bothered me but today I am excited to be going back to my Virginia home and the life Jim and I lead. So many wonderful people live in Illinois and Wisconsin but the folks in Virginia are special too.

Ah ha, the huge fiberglass pumpkin (18' wide and 15' tall) that has been roosting atop a silo for so many years is still there but now it is surrounded by a subdivision.



We are deep in traffic now as a chubby fellow on a cycle crosses two lanes of traffic and whips along the shoulder around a string of cars, then guns it back across two lanes again. A sign

overhead informs us that there have been 689 traffic deaths this year.....wonder why!? A monstrous airplane scrapes over us near O'Hare Airport. Sure hope the pilot keeps control of that puppy or this pretty blue Prius (and us too) will be turned into toast.

Vehicles are playing a game of chance as they snake from lane to lane. The downtown skyline looms ahead of us in the haze.



My knuckles are white but Jim has the camera clicking as Randy threads his way through the mess. I'll never again complain about congestion on Wards Road back home in Lynchburg. Randy says he couldn't deal with this every day. Sure hope all these people don't plan to board our train. Oops! There goes another cycle around us on the shoulder...that skill must be a requirement for licensing.

Three miles to go. Good grief! I spot a playground monitor wearing a hard hat at a parochial school.

We stand in front of Union Station and say our goodbyes. Randy eases that blue Prius into traffic and disappears. Nah, those aren't tears on my face, just delayed sweat from summer.

Jim helps a lady with a walker who expected to be met at the front door with a wheel chair. She is headed for Cincinnati and we have a two hour wait ahead of us. We sit and chat. The lady with the walker is from Rockford. Jim is able to hail a red-cap who gives her a ride to her departure gate. Beside us is a couple from Des Moines but I discover he lived five miles from me when I was born. We have a great time comparing memories of people in that area.

Eventually, we are moved to a holding area and a classy guy with stringy hair sits behind me. Oh, the stench! This guy could gag a maggot so we move. The gate attendant shares that they might need a separate car for him. I suggest we could douse him with Fabreeze.

Ah, time to board and "Old Stinky" gets on a different car. Whew!!!

We rock and roll through South Chicago, past houses with boarded-up or barricaded windows. Can't even imagine living in that kind of fear.

Randy is about home and he calls to tell us that there are numerous accidents inbound. He thinks if we had been a half hour later, we would have missed our train. Another whew!!!!

Still we are rolling and are in Dyers, IN. Only 681 miles to go.

We sleep fitfully. I awake with Jim standing over me. Because I am in the aisle seat I ask him if he needs to get past me. He gives me a strange look, answers, "Maybe later", then plops down in his seat, his head laid back, just staring into space. I ask him if he is OK and there is no response. When I touch his cheek, he is ice cold but dripping with sweat. Slaps on his cheeks draws no response and I cry out for somebody to find a conductor. Immediately angels appear from all around the coach, including four nurses. People are grabbing our blanket, pillows and bags so help can get to Jim. From out of nowhere a bag of ice is put on his chest and cold cloths are applied to his forehead. A man in a red jacket comes from behind me and pulls me tightly to him and suggests that we pray. The entire circle of people is praying for Jim.

Slowly Jim regained consciousness and is puzzled by all the commotion around him. He is able to answer all the questions correctly so we rule out a stroke. Someone wonders if it is a circulation problem because, "Look, his one fingertip has turned red".



I explain that fingernail is the handy work of our seven-year-old granddaughter and some of the tension is broken. Someone else comments, "What a good grampa! I wouldn't let her do that to me!"

When the EMTs board at Connersville, IN, they strongly suggest he go to the local hospital. Everyone helps me gather our belongings and, as I follow the EMTs and Jim down the aisle,

total strangers reach out to touch my arm and tell me it will be OK. Two ladies and the conductor go with me to the ambulance and make sure I get everything along. An attendant is taking care of Jim in the back.

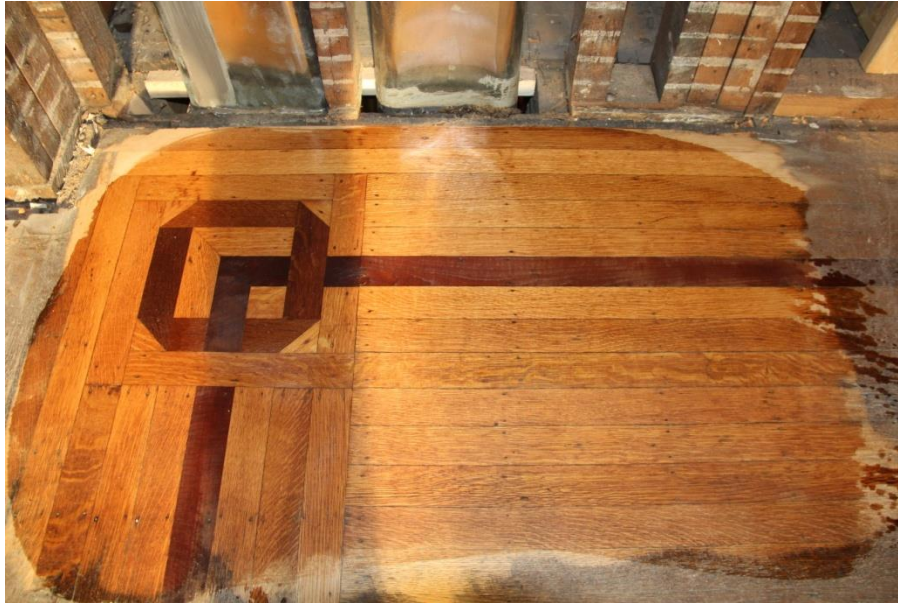
At the emergency room Jim is taken care of with compassion and courtesy. They decide he should be taken up to ICU for observation and here we find yet another group of wonderful people. When the daytime shift of nurses comes on duty, their first question is, "Let's see that fingernail we've been hearing about." The neurologist pulls up a chair and launches into an old-friend-type conversation, "Where have you been? How many grandchildren do you have? Tell me what happened on that train. Where are you going on your next trip?"

All day Jim is being put thru tests; they do everything but rearrange his eyebrows. I am allowed to stay in the room with him and I claim a comfy recliner. Of course, our cell phone gets a workout with family and friends checking on him. We are about 65 miles from Cincinnati and Ellen arrives to keep me company. Such a sweetheart she is! About 5:30 Jim is sprung from ICU and Ellen loads us up in her SUV for the jaunt to their home.

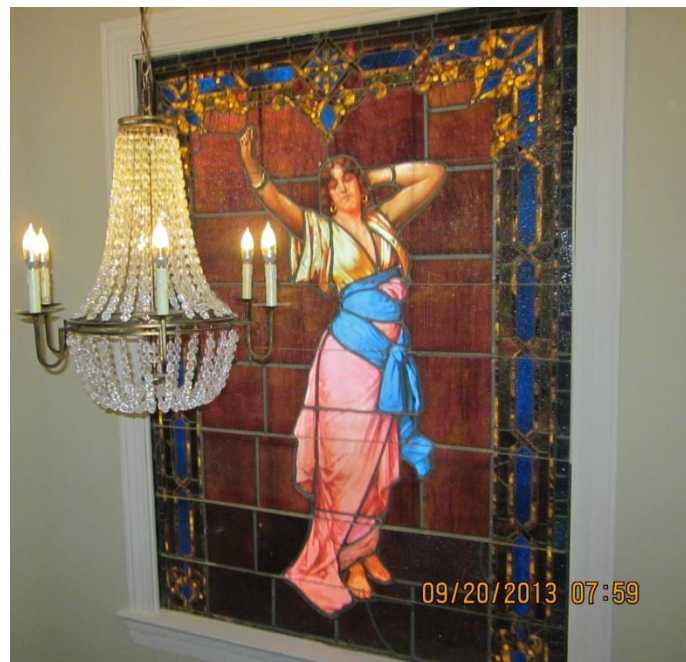
Their beautifully restored 1900 home is amazing. The first picture below is of the house before they restored it. The second is in December 2013 after they worked their magic of love on their new home.



The hardwood floors throughout are finished to a satin sheen; one floor upstairs has a parquet design. Below is a picture of that floor when they were refinishing it.



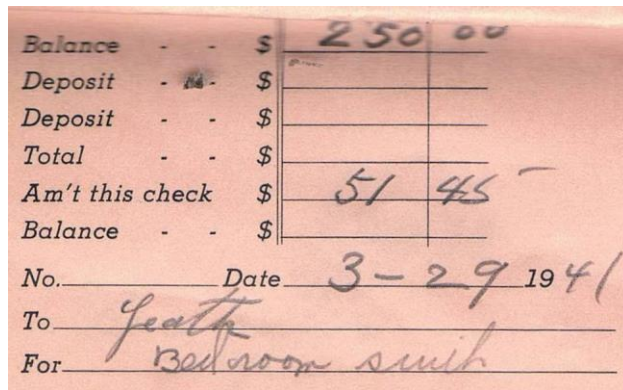
Every nook and cranny holds an architectural surprise. The island in the kitchen is built from refinished old wooden doors. All windows have deep ledges, just right for KitCat to sprawl out in the warm sunshine. The master bath has a claw-foot tub and a floor that heats in cold weather. Most gorgeous of all is the stained glass window above the three-tiered open staircase.



A deep porch extends across the front of the house and it is the perfect place for enjoying a cup of coffee as a gentle breeze wraps itself around you and distant church bells ring. But you have to make sure the door is closed so KitCat doesn't escape.



Sleep is welcome in the bed that my parents purchased in 1941 (They bought the whole set for \$51.45 from Leath Furniture store in Freeport, Illinois).



Sometime during the night I wake to hear Jim talking to KitCat. Whatever...let me sleep! We wake to daylight and 8 AM. Yup, we were pooped.

Ellen takes us to lunch at The Echo, a busy little café in the neighborhood. She suggests a Reuben sandwich. I've never had one of those so it is high time to try one. Yum!! It is so good!



She takes us for a quick tour of historic Cincinnati and we stop in a park miles above the Ohio River.



A tugboat is busy pushing a barge but my mind's eye is seeing early settlers navigating their way to Illinois.



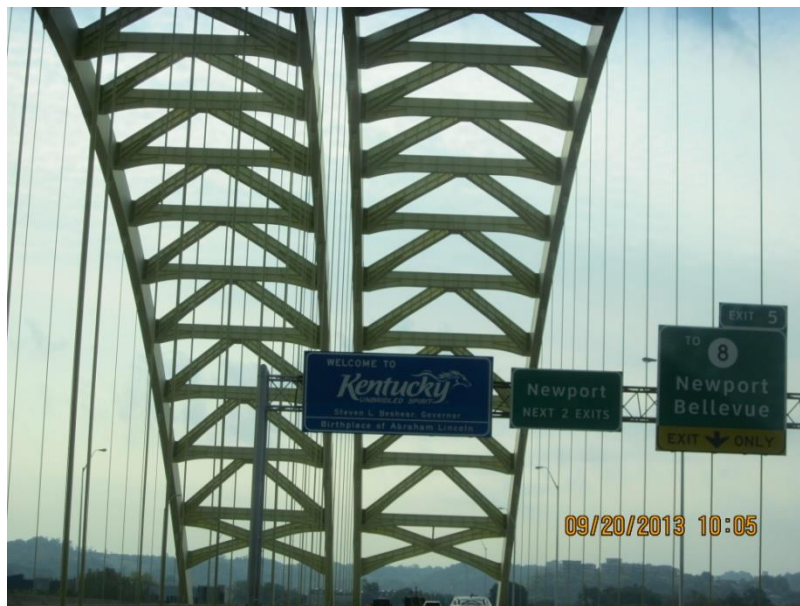
Maybe this is where my great grandparents came. We will never know for sure but it is such fun to imagine.

After dinner (That is still known as supper to us old farm-hicks.) Larry and Anna introduce us to Graeters in Little Hyde Park Square.



Graeter's began making ice cream in Cincinnati in 1870 and the family-owned company still produces it in 2-gallon batches. One of the test technicians in Connersville told Jim to be sure to go to Graeter's when he heard our next stop would be Cincinnati. We sit beside the bubbling fountain in the center-of-the-street-park and enjoy yummy waffle cones filled with black raspberry ice cream. Yup, it is yummy stuff!

Ten AM, Friday October 20 and Larry pulls the maroon SUV away from Fairfield House for our dash back to Lynchburg. Goodbye Cincinnati and Ohio.



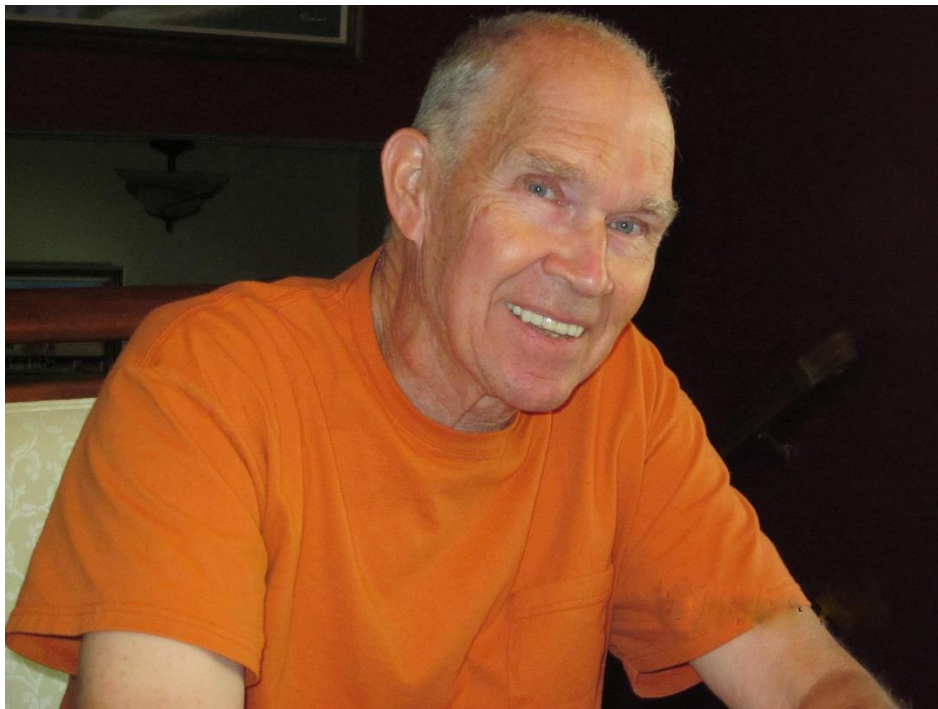
Kentucky is our venue now but it looks exactly like Ohio did with modern roads and lots of bridges and the usual constant road construction areas. We have one last glimpse of the downtown Cincinnati skyline in the distance as we turn onto the AA Highway. We were on this road in 2006.

Larry and our transportation of choice chew up the miles. A quick stop at Chuck's Hobby Shop west of Charleston gains Jim some model train layout supplies, then we roll eastward again. It is Two PM. Ooops! We lose about forty-five minutes in traffic, stopped for a burnt-up truck. I suspect our day is going a whole lot better than that poor truck driver's is.

The jaunt between Charleston and Beckley is so very beautiful as we zoom along with rock-wall mountains on both sides of us. The trees are still green with just the barest hint of fall. In a few weeks these mountains will pop with a blaze of color.

East of Beckley our sunshine turns into rain. Sure glad this Odyssey has a windshield. Remnants of summer's pink and white cosmos wildflowers still flavor the center medians.

About suppertime we pull in the drive at my favorite place in all the world...1131 Heath Avenue. I thank God that Jim is walking into our kitchen. I am so blessed!



Added note: Today it is 9 weeks after our trip and Jim still has a teeny-tiny bit of that hot pink polish on his fingernail. He refuses to peel it off because he cherishes the memory of a sweet little girl's exuberance and joy. A battery of tests in Lynchburg have ruled out reasons for Jim's train episode but they have discovered he has PVC (premature ventricular contraction) which means his heart tosses in extra beats so he is on a low dose of beta blockers. Life goes on and the Christmas tree is already up. Life is good, God is great!

