

Another "Excellent Adventure" in our life. Caution: This story is fifteen pages long so, if you choose to wade through it, unhook the phone, lock the front door, and get yourself a nice cold glass of lemonade. Please disregard any grammar or punctuation errors as you join us on another of our gadabout adventures.

Reunions Ahead

June 28, 2006 has been a long time coming. In fact, this trip began a year ago when plans were first made to attend my forty-five-year high school class reunion in Illinois. After months of anticipation, the day is finally here and we, after a nine-hour day at work (and after finding a note from Cindy on our windshield, wishing us a safe trip), are on our way to Illinois. It is 5:20 on a rainy evening. Just one mile from home we get into a traffic jam and hope this is not a portend of things to come. From the looks of the little red Cavalier, we can't possibly have forgotten anything. It is full of the necessities of traveling...even my class quilt. This is the first time this vehicle will make the round trip to Illinois and back to Virginia. The last time it traveled this route, it was loaded on a trailer behind a Ryder truck in January 2000.



The rains have stopped, the sky is clearing, Route 460 is dry, and it's gonna be a good, good trip! Along the way we spot a sign proclaiming "Age is a matter of mind. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter." Such a poignant thought for somebody on her way to a class reunion!

Traffic is light as we head westward on Interstate 64, into the setting sun on a pleasant summer evening. I think even my heart is smiling tonight.

We cross the New River. The sun has set now and we are in a canyon of dark green mountain silhouettes. We pass trucks that are clawing their way up these mountains and our ears are popping. The pink sky ahead of us is gradually turning a grayish-blue as we see a sign at the top of Sandstone Mountain, telling us of our 2,765 foot elevation at the moment. Darkness is robbing our view.

Our plans to stop for a few hours of rest at Beckley, West Virginia, lose out to a flow of adrenaline and we find ourselves at a travel plaza about twenty-five miles south of Charleston at ten p.m. It is high time to stretch our legs a bit. A white kitten, mewling pitifully, is standing guard in the rear window of a Wisconsin car in the parking lot. Soon a young family with three little kids comes out of the plaza and they drive off, hugging the kitty. We chuckle at the condition that car might be in when it finally reaches Wisconsin. There are no worries

of a stranger hiding in our back seat while we walk around the plaza. Not even a midget would fit in there.

On the road again we spot the moon. Since dark it has been a white sliver but now it has turned pumpkin orange. A few miles from Charleston is Marmet. Here we see chemical plants that are lit up like a city of lights. Barges fill the Kanawha River, even at this time of night. I spot the Capitol building-all lit up with its sparkling gold dome.



Charleston is a marvelous city of bridges and cloverleaves and overhead pedestrian walks. The Kanawha is glassy smooth tonight with myriads of reflected street lights. We cross that river a half dozen times, it seems.

Wahoo! The Kentucky line! We stop at a Waffle House for some much needed coffee, then a few miles later we find a Visitors' Welcome Center to stretch our legs. A few more miles up the road we run into rain. We've been seeing lightening ahead of us and now we are in the midst of it. At Vanceburg, Kentucky, we stop for gas and meet a trucker who has been to both Lynchburg, Virginia, and Freeport, Illinois. He advises us of a quick way to go through Cincinnati. Hope I can follow his directions.

About fifteen miles south of Cincinnati we find a safe spot to stop for a few hours of sleep. It certainly does not take long for our "lights" to go out, but consciousness comes before daylight and we are back on the road again.

Cincinnati, Ohio, is a beautiful city of skyscrapers and majestic old buildings. Jim and I have been through this town several times on Amtrak and it is gorgeous. There are bridges-lots of bridges-painted yellow and blue and silver and purple. **Purple???**

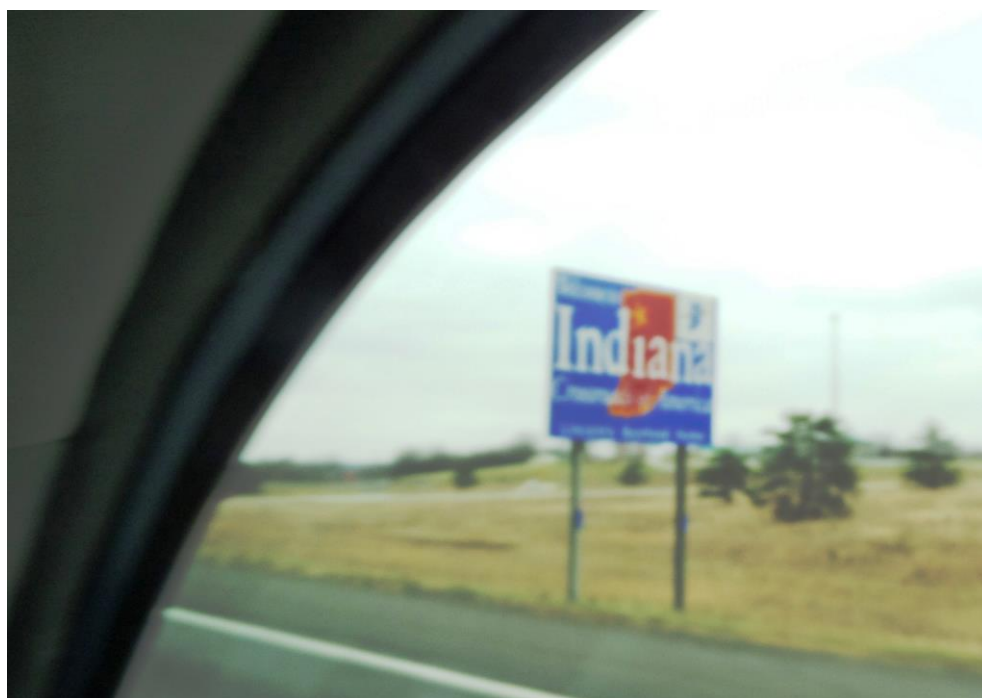


The Purple People Bridge was built in 1872 for normal traffic, but now is only open to pedestrians. They painted it purple, then spent three million dollars to build handrails and steps zigzagging over the top of the bridge. At

one point you can stand on a two-inch-thick glass platform 140 feet above the Ohio River. All of this can be had for the meager sum of \$59.95 during the day or \$79.95 at sunset, sunrise or at night.. After a safety course, the actual climb takes an hour and a half over the 2,670 foot-long span. As a bonus you get to wear a purple and yellow jumpsuit plus a safety harness. (If one falls over the edge, everybody else goes along for the ride, too, I guess.) This attraction was opened June 20, 2006 and the promoters are hoping for 80,000 climbers per year. Only \$100,000 of revenue is needed per year to offset the costs of operation. This is one of four such bridge climbs in the world, the others being in New Zealand and Australia. I am tempted to try it.

But first we need to get out of this town. The trucker's directions last night do not make sense so I "wing it" and, somehow, we make it through downtown Cincinnati just as the Thursday morning rush begins. Jim is very trusting of my navigation abilities but, just between you and me, I know full well that I simply lucked out this time. We head westward on Interstate 74 with a big red ball of sun lighting our backs.

It is 6:43 a.m. as we cross the Indiana state line.



The ground is mighty flat but there are plenty of trees. Rows of just-up soybeans form a border along the roads. Acres of dark green corn, about ten inches high, spread as far as we can see.



Batesville, Indiana, has a handy McDonalds and I feel like a new woman after washing my face and changing clothes before breakfast. One of the maintenance men there chats with Jim and shares that he wants to buy a motor home and take his wife on trips. She has never been out of Indiana. We hope he is able to do that someday.

Horses and foals, their tails swishing, wait at the pasture gate for their morning rations of grain. Black feeder cattle are busy mowing down their own pasture in an adjoining field. Farmyards here look so “Midwest”. Pickup trucks fill the roads, pulling tanks of Anhydrous Ammonia for field application so the corn will produce more grain. Silver grain bins dot the landscape as Hereford calves munch fresh grass.



We are about 340 miles from our destination for today, the Rochelle, Illinois, Railpark.

Indianapolis is a spaghetti bowl of roads. It never ceases to amaze me that you can actually go through those messes and end up where you want to be. Our cell phone rings and it is Cindy, wanting to check on our progress. The technology of cell phones also amazes me. I wonder how people managed to travel across country before their invention. Blue chicory and orange trumpet vines line the fences along our way.

Lizton, Indiana’s, rest area is an oasis of manicured grass, accented by oodles of petunias and red salvias.



All this is nestled beside acres of waving corn and soy beans. A sign inside the travel center advises that this is a storm shelter. Yes, TOTO, you are not so far from Kansas. Birds in the trees overhead are having a heated committee meeting as we walk back to the car. It is such a lovely summer morning!

Queen Anne's lace and sweet peas join the chicory along our way. Elderberries are in full bloom and crown vetch and daisies are abundant, as are the orange day lilies and pockets of cat tails. Brown wheat is ready for harvest and the giant hog barn complexes are very much in use. We are getting deeper into corn and bean country and notice the near absence of cattle.

Hello, Illinois at 10:45 a.m. This must mean we are almost there.



A steak and cheese foot-long from Subway in Champaign satisfies our growling tummies and we “press on, ever westward” once more. The names of towns and roads are familiar but, at the same time, I feel detached. Illinois just is not home anymore. I love the state and so many dear people who live here but I am now the visitor. My nose prickles and my eyes tear a bit as we make the turn northward onto Interstate 39 just north of Bloomington. Oh, how often I’ve come around this corner on trips to see my kids at U of I in Champaign; SIU in Carbondale, Illinois; Murray State in Murray, Kentucky; then to Atlanta and Watkinsville, Georgia.

Jim asks how far we have left to go and I tell him that this is our last road before we reach the Rochelle turnoff at highway marker 100. He notes that we have just passed marker number one. Within a half mile he has pulled off and asks if I would mind driving a few miles so he can rest. He is pooped! He dozes and I wheel the Cavalier the next hundred miles toward Rochelle, marveling at the flat countryside and changing landscape.

Down a long hill and we cross the beautiful Illinois River. The bridge is still as pretty as ever.



A wind farm with approximately twenty-five turbines is along the road near Paw Paw. Jim surfaces just in time to take over driving duties into the Rochelle Railpark and we arrive at the same time as a snazzy Union Pacific westbound. Jim is happy. My goal was to get here (842 miles from home) at two p.m. and we are only thirty-five minutes behind schedule.



The Union Pacific and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroads both pass through Rochelle and four sets of tracks intersect to form a diamond with more than 80 freight trains a day passing by. The city has built a large pavilion with picnic tables and benches for the comfort of railfans.



A scanner, tuned to the frequencies of both railroads, keeps everybody posted on the next train to arrive. People from all over the country visit here and it is an amazing experience to chat with so many folks. You would not believe the stories you hear! Jim often keys in the web cam for this place and almost daily watches as trains pass by. Now we are here instead of watching on our computer. During the next hour and a half ten trains pass. It is eighty-two degrees and a good breeze keeps us cool in the shelter.



After checking in at the local Super 8 Motel, we head for the Iron Skillet Restaurant for a quiet, warm supper. The waitress tells us that she lives near those wind turbines that I saw a few miles up the road. There are sixty of them and the power is sold to a company in Wisconsin. We take another tour of the railpark, then settle in for a much needed rest at the motel.

Morning (June 30) dawns bright and clear. We have one last look at the railpark before beginning our northward trek. Jim is still in awe that you can see so far across the countryside. As we near Rockford, the terrain looks much like the Pennsylvania Dutch area, with gently rolling hills and acres of waving cornfields.





Our drive along Montague and Edwardsville Road leads us to my childhood vicinity. Our first stop to visit Becky Buttel finds nobody home there but we spot their gorgeous new log home under construction. This is no run-of-the-mill pioneer log cabin. It is classy, very much like the lady who will soon live there. It just looks so “Becky” and we hope for a tour of it someday.

Next door to Buttels is my birthplace. New owners, Mr. and Mrs. Jeff Brubaker, take such loving care of the property.



My parents would be so proud of the way this farm looks today! A new house stands in place of the house built by my great grandparents but several steel buildings from my childhood remain. I can still picture my dad and mom stacking hay bales in that one shed and Dad’s beloved antique Rumely Do-All tractor was stored in the shed just east of the hayshed.



I see the mulberry tree by the road and smile at the memory of my kids calling it the “Mothball tree”.

About a quarter mile south of the buildings, the old boxelder tree still stands. Dad always called that the “bee tree” because yearly bee nests at its roots gave him cause to plow a wide furrow around that tree. I spot the water hydrant which always stood near the cattle water tank. Now it supplies water for a small garden plot. The walnut tree still stands and I vividly remember poking chickens out of that tree so they would sleep in the chicken house over night.



(They risked becoming a coon’s midnight snack if they stayed in the tree.) A new driveway has been added (right up through the old chicken yard!) and it truly is a beautiful country home now.



With my eyes closed, I can see the old gray house,



Dad's long-gone barn, all of Mom's flowers and her lush garden, my dog, Smoky, is chasing a cat, my red trike is parked beside the kitchen door, and my swing is at-the-ready in the apple tree south of the house. I am a kid again, lying on the cool grass and picking animal shapes out of the cloud formations. *The picture below was taken yesterday, somewhere in Ohio.*

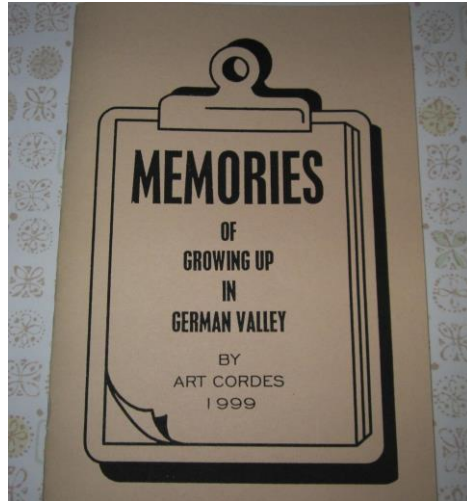


But this is 2006 and that little girl only exists inside of me so we need to move on again.

Gary Johnson is not at the German Valley Bank today but we have a nice chat with Nancy Borchers.



She gives me a calendar and several pencils with the bank logo. Of course!, I buy the booklet of German Valley history as seen through the eyes of Art Cordes.



So many pictures float around my head while I thumb through the book. It is like sitting beside my dad as he tells of his early life. In the bank lobby is a detailed replica of the bank, built by my old pal, Stan Dieken.

We pay our respects to my parents at Silver Creek Cemetery. Jim stands quietly beside me, his arm around my shoulders, as I simply stand by their stone.



Somebody (my guess is Betty Ginger) has placed flowers at their grave and I must thank her for being so thoughtful. Across the street is Silver Creek Church.



Ethel Osterloo and Donna Smith are in the church office so we spend a pleasant time with them.



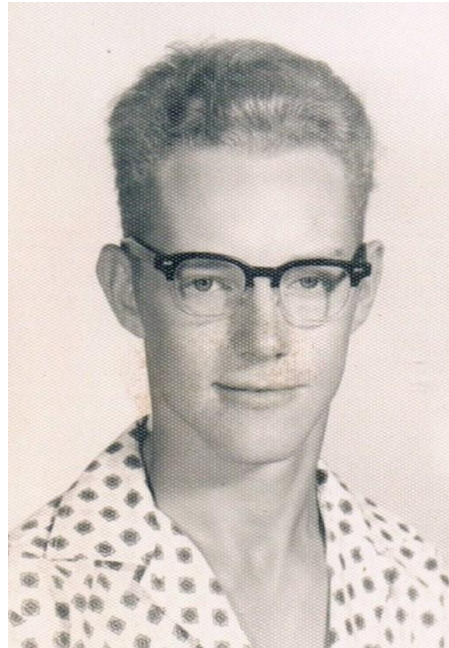
What dynamite ladies!

I stand in the quiet, dimly-lit sanctuary and the memories wash over me. I see my mom and dad, dressed in their Sunday best, sitting a few rows from the front on the right side.



I see the wedding of a naïve teenage girl there forty-five years ago and then see two funerals in 1987 and 1989. So much of my life was experienced in that church.

Stan Dieken is not home today (He is helping a neighbor with some farm chores.) but we have a nice chat with his wife, Lois. She tells us of Stan's many wood projects. Lois stands on the deck, talking to us, but my mind is not really on the conversation. This is the childhood home of Stan and his sister Darlene and modern vehicles are parked in the driveway today but my mind's eye sees Stan's first car, bright blue (a Ford, maybe?) and affectionately called "The Blue Bird". Stan is such a good guy and an old friend. *That's my pal Stan below in about 1959.*



We roll across the countryside and I am immersed in memories of my past. Soon we come around a curve and Baileyville comes into view. The railroad tracks are long gone and Nath's no longer operate the elevator but in my mind I can still smell the dusty aroma of ground corn and oats.





We drive past the long-deserted Baileyville Grade School. It still stands but is in need of TLC. Oh, the memories of bringing my little ones to start their first days of school. As usual, my mind is seeing my beloved 5 playing in the school yard. I'm that young mom again, just for a fleeting moment, helping a crew of other moms as we stand in the little kitchen and plan refreshments for the next school party.



Baileyville means a stop at the Seuring farm. Dorothy is most gracious, inviting us in and showing us pictures of their family. Irvin is busy at the Forreston farm so we miss him. They are loyal friends.

Another loyal friend is Judy Meyer.



Rich is in Canada on a fishing trip but Judy shows us her garden and we have a nice visit. Linda and Glen

Auman are also there.

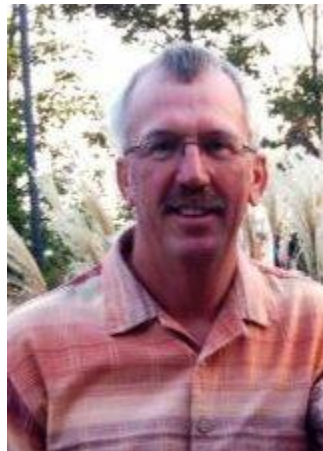
We drive up Florence Road, past “the farm” on our way to Freeport.



I want to stop at Farm and Fleet.



Oh, how many hours I spent there in my past. The clerks were always so very helpful, but today not one person there is familiar. Where have all the “old-timers” gone? As we leave, a man holds the door for me. I tell him, “I know you!” He says, “I know you too. I heard you were coming to Illinois.” He is Joni Cornelius’ son-in-law, Denny Borgman.



What fun to meet him! Next stop is Murphy and Gustafson, the local John Deere dealer, for some literature on John Deere tractors. I bet I could still drive those big green beauties!

No trip to Freeport would be complete without a stop at my favorite-in-all-the-world restaurant for my favorite-in-all-the-world meal, the Spring Grove Meat and Potato Special. It tastes as wonderful as I remember.



Many times my coworkers and I (at Micro Switch) ordered out that dish for our supper so many years ago. Lyn Dinderman is a waitress there and she gives me her address so I can send her newspaper clippings of her parents' wedding over fifty years ago.

Driving along Main Street we see a number of little scarecrow-type people along the sidewalks.





Actually, there are sixty of them, the work of Nancy Seiner. Nancy first placed them along Main and Stephenson Streets last fall with a harvest theme. Then, in December, the little people were, once again, placed along the streets, this time dressed to fit the Christmas season. January first they were removed but reappeared this past spring, back between the sidewalks and street, in summer attire and standing among colorful beds of flowers. Various builders donated scraps of lumber for the project and the clothing was obtained from Good Will and friends and neighbors. Olga describes Nancy as one of Freeport's best cheerleaders. She is a delightful lady.

Olga Carlile is in Michigan on vacation this week so I leave a note for her at the Journal Standard.



Soon we are on a mission for a family gastric favorite. Jim is introduced to the Mrs. Mike's Potato Chip factory where we purchase several bags to take back to Virginia.



He does not understand why anybody would be so excited about a local brand of potato chips. My mind drifts back to the day I arrived at Atlanta Airport. My daughters' first comments were, "Hi, Mom....Where are the Mrs. Mike's?" I guess it is an acquired taste-much like turnip greens.

My beloved Hardin Avenue house has a fresh paint job and new railings up the front steps. And, of all things, they have removed the dividing rail between the two sides of the front porch. Mary and Jane and I wished for that the whole time I lived there. How I love that house! It was my oasis of peace in the midst of a personal storm. So many caring people visited me there and helped me thread my way through some difficult times during my eighteen-month inhabitation in Freeport. Life goes on but the good memories are there whenever you choose to lift them to the surface.



Jim is such a treasure and a good sport about all of my stops. He shakes his head and says, "Just tell me which way to turn."

It takes some doing but we find Edna May's new home and are so happy to see her. Her place is filled with quilts and family pictures and bird figurines and scads of Longaberger baskets. Those baskets are everywhere and Cindy would be enthralled. Edna has some health problems; we hope things improve for her. She is too much of a go-getter to be held down by aches and pains. We spend time catching up on each others' lives, then hit the road again. Oh, how I miss that Edna!



She was one of my best buddies at Honeywell/Micro Switch and we had so many laughs together. I can still picture her and Don at their kitchen table on West Logan Street as we played roaring games of Scrabble late into the night after work. Sometimes Hazel or Ray joined us. Problem was Don always beat us all hollow. I suspect he studied that Scrabble dictionary while we were still at work. Don will always hold a warm place in my heart and he is very much missed.

Lottie is not home, nor are Diane and Dick so we head toward Forreston. But first we must stop to check in with Lowell and Lorraine Swalve. These are two very special people. Our timing is not so good because Lorraine is loading Lowell into their van for a physical therapy session. Lowell tells us he wishes we could stop back tomorrow. Jim stops to take pictures of Lowell's beautiful corn fields as we drive out of their long driveway.



My, how Forreston is changing! We stop for gas but the station just does not look right to me. It seemed that the pumps were on the opposite side before. Then a man, (married to Lucia Duitsman) who has struck up a conversation with Jim, tells us that this is a new station and the old one is closed. Oh, yes, this was the Lazerus car place. Now things are making more sense.

Donna Cornelius warns us as we get to her back steps that the railing is not sturdy anymore. It seems Rocky (the petite 140 pound golden retriever) recently was tied there but saw somebody he really wanted to play with so he simply left ---- and the railing got the worst of the deal. It is so good to hug Donna again. She is one of those comfortable people who makes you feel right at home. Soon Joni Cornelius arrives for supper too. We spend the evening in pleasant conversation. *Below Joni is on the left and Donna is on the right.*



Jim, Donna, and Joni have a great time remembering old country songs and singers. Me? Hey, I like what my kids call “elevator music” so those three won’t get any input from me on country music. Rocky is in the midst of it all, plopped down, his belly on the cool hardwood floor, and his legs sprawled out in four directions. He looks like a big, furry, bear rug. Through a series of coincidences, Larry Miller knows we are in the area and I get a call from him.



We talk for an hour about our families and grandkids and mutual acquaintances. Another call is to Kathy Merrill.



Kathy and I have laughed and cried together for so many years. She is like a sister. She shares that she and Gordon are leaving for the Black Hills in South Dakota tomorrow with their grandchildren. They are brave.....

Too soon it is time for Joni to go home. We exchange hugs until next time. Donna's daughter, Heather and her Jimmy arrive for a few minutes. It is good to see them and to have a chance to get to know Jimmy.

Rocky is locked in the kitchen overnight and he gives me some pleading looks when he spots me. Oh, well, as long as he has those dry, old pig ears and big, chewy bones to gnaw on, he is not in all that bad of shape. Donna says he must stay in the kitchen or he will be up in the bed with us. The gate across the kitchen door sounds like a good plan to me!

We wake up with Sebastian, the cat, pushing his nose under our hands. Donna and I read the morning paper and compare notes on our favorite comic strips while Jim watches a horse opera on TV. A large storage container holds Donna's collection of cookbooks and we happily dig through them. Also in that box is a letter which Holly wrote to her father when he was very ill. Oh, such a treasure! Wiley Lynch arrives to pick up my class quilt and a scrapbook so they can be at the reunion tonight early for display. (The quilt has each class member's name and their birthday in the center of a block, bordered by cloth from some garment which I wore during my school years. The blocks are joined with a lemon yellow fabric. In the center of it is a larger block with the names of all of my high school teachers and the class motto. Triangles around the edge of the quilt list my high school classes and organizations. This quilt was constructed by my mom and grandma in 1961.)



Wiley is such a friendly person. I agree with Sue Terry Roskam that Wiley is always so “real”. He spent all of his working years on the Illinois Central Railroad so he and Jim talk “trains”.



After a yummy breakfast, we make one more stop to visit Lowell and Lorraine. It feels so good to sit at their table and just chat. Last year Lowell had some major health problems and was not expected to come home again. God’s hand and Lorraine’s fierce determination made the outcome more favorable. While Lowell is confined to a wheel chair at the moment, he still has all of his old pizzazz and is generally “full of it”. On their kitchen counter stands a bouquet of flowers from their recent anniversary. At our age, you learn to cherish each day. As we drive away, Lorraine, wearing her jaunty red hat, (She is a member of the Red Hat Society.) is herding the rider lawn mower across their front lawn, grinning and waving to us.

We still can’t make contact with Lottie Lawrence and Art Ross is not at his shop this morning so we take Highway 75 north of Freeport to Rock City and the home of my cousin, Sylvia Hillman, and her husband Bill.



They are building a new home near a lake at the back of their property and we drive along Bill's landing strip to have a tour of the site. It is a peaceful, beautiful spot for the home they have been planning for since they moved to this farm many years ago. A summer storm chases us back to the farmyard and we are directed to drive right on into the plane hangar. Bill's airplane is sitting toward the back but there is plenty of room for vehicles. This is one big hanger. The rain lets up a bit and we dash for the kitchen door. It feels so "family" as we sit at their kitchen table and discuss the "stuff" of our lives. Taped to the doors of the china cabinet are the grandkids' art works. I look at Sylvia and see Aunt Rosie and her big kitchen at the farm near Rock Grove. God certainly did give me some good relatives!

The rain stops and we must be on our way again. The scarcity of brick houses in the Midwest is a curiosity to Jim as we drive along the rural roads. Abundant rains have left the area full of lush green growth. We've made several stops at Wallace Yards (Canadian National's rail yards in Freeport) but a good picture of locomotives eludes us.



As we thread our way among the back streets, I see something which makes me shake my head. Someone has

built a rider lawn mower-no, not the usual kind, but one fashioned from an old reel-type push mower, attached to the front of a bicycle frame (with the front wheel removed). You simply peddle along and the reel mower does its work. We wonder if they have a patent on that thing. Some film is purchased at Walmart, then we stop at a new-to-me grocery store on the south edge of town for ice. Near the grocery store is another new store, called “Butts and Booze”. Sounds like a really classy establishment..

Our Illinois trek is nearly over as we work our way back to Forreston. Jim wants to stop beside the rail crossing north of Forreston along Highway 26.



As I sit in the car alongside the road, I remember when this crossing was an underpass and my mind pictures the graffiti on that underpass. I think my five kids probably used about five gallons of paint there.



The best paint-job was the time the youth group from Forreston Grove Church advertised their ice cream social there. The church dads didn't think that was a good place to advertise and soon told the teenagers to remove it. This afternoon's heat shimmers above an undulating sea of dark green corn. Such beauty!



But the longer this trip goes, the more I feel like a tourist. Illinois still pulls at my heart and I want to take so many good friends, relatives, and neighbors home with us. There just has not been enough time to see all of them. I hope they understand. Each time I visit this place, I wonder if I will ever come back again and, if I do, will the people I love still be here.

Donna's house is very quiet as we come in. Her furkids, the kitties (the striped cutie, Sebastian; Cyrus, the yellow fellow; Mickey Me-ow, Heather's kitty when she was attending a Kansas City college; Frosty, the black, fluffy one; and Miss Krabby Katey, one of the dumped ones) and Rocky, are all sprawled out for naps. We and Donna chat a while. She tells us of her plans to ride trains in the Northeast with a bank tour group in October to view the fall colors. It sounds like such fun! Then it is time to get changed for the class reunion and pack up our suitcases. She sends along another pack of Mrs. Mike chips (She shares Jim's lack of appreciation for those chips and readily gives them up!) and a jar of her homemade grape jelly. It is hard to drive away from this special lady. She stands on her back steps (the ones that Rocky remodeled recently) and throws us a kiss as we leave.



I catch a glimpse of "the farm" as we pass by on the highway and am glad that home is now Virginia. All of us are the sum of our life's experiences and circumstances. I hope the new owner can find peace there. Jim understands and pats my arm. I am so very blessed.

One last stop before the class reunion is the new Freeport Visitors' Center. Stories in the Journal Standard did not do justice to this place. It rivals any we have seen along the Interstates and we come out of the building with a handful of local "propaganda" literature.



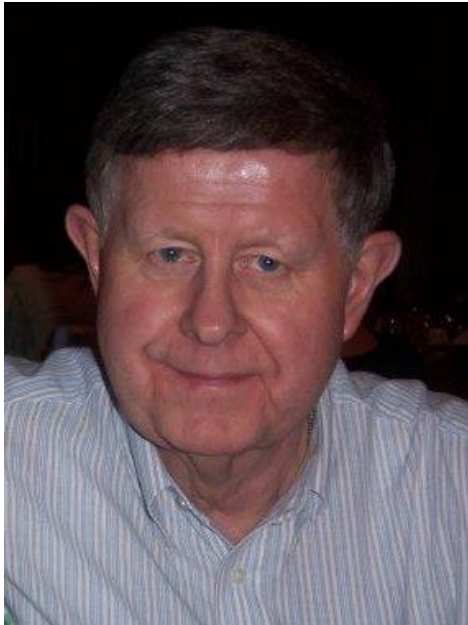
Hooray! The long-awaited class reunion is at hand. The Four Seasons' parking lot is full, due to normal bowling customers, a wedding reception, and our class reunion. Wiley meets us at the door and gives Jim an Illinois Central Pin (which I immediately claim) and a wooden locomotive mantle decoration.



The reunion committee is busy attending to last minute details. Duska Haijenga Ruter is running true to form-she is a whirl of activity, arranging flowers on the tables and making sure everything is JUST RIGHT. For a few minutes I am back in Freshman Home Ec. The rest of the girls are sewing simple skirts but not Duska. I can still see the gorgeous pale yellow prom gown, with yards of lace and ruffles, which was talented Duska's first project.



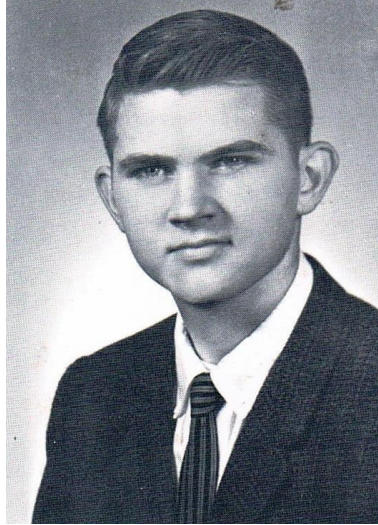
The evening is a blur of people and memories. Faye Smith Bailey's husband Lyle is the originator of their marvelous Christmas letters and we chat a moment.



One classmate, Barb DeVries Zuspahn, tells of a recent trip to Thailand to visit her niece.



Jack Grigsby, still a barber, belatedly remembers that I left the FHA scrapbook with him before I left Freeport.



Larry and Denise DeGraff Lane are there and we catch up on our families.



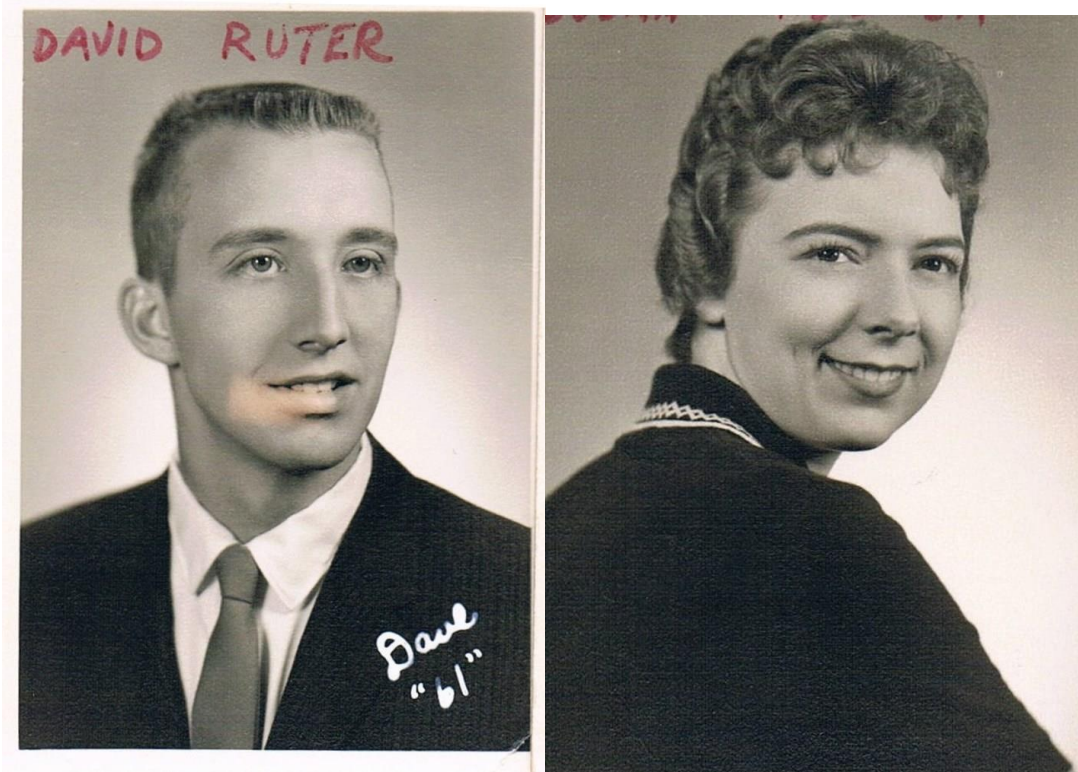
They are anticipating the acquisition of a computer in the near future so we make plans to stay in touch over cyberspace. Denise and I did not “touch hearts” until many years after high school graduation but I am so glad we are friends now! *In the picture below, I'm not sure what Larry is trying to tell me, but it didn't fly:*



Leo Korf remembers the day he was doing farm work on Florence Road and I brought lunch to the field for him.



Dave Ruter is in real-estate now instead of trucking and Duska is a nurse at the Polo nursing home.

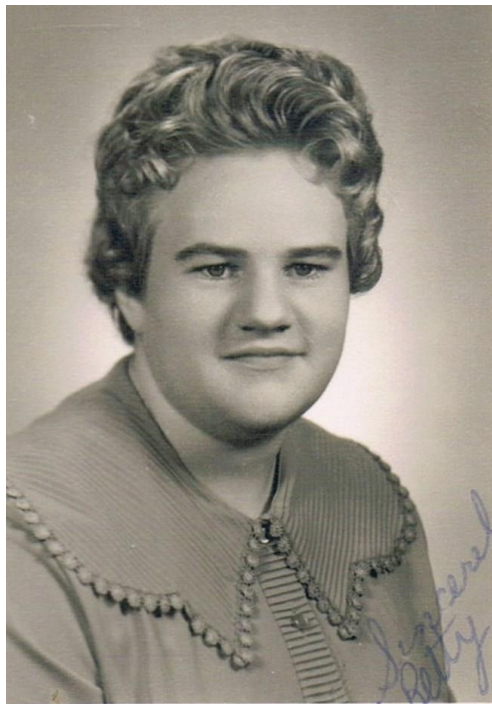


Duska and I talk about genealogy and she promises to research her mom's ancestry records, looking for one of my elusive relatives.

Elaine Heeren Hayenga tells of her wish to become more comfortable with her computer.



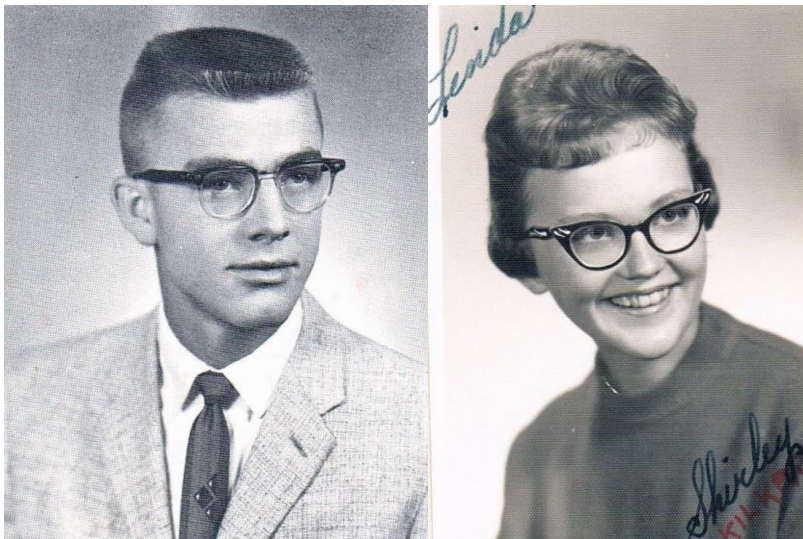
Betty Kitzmiller Remmers is excited about her new great grandchild.



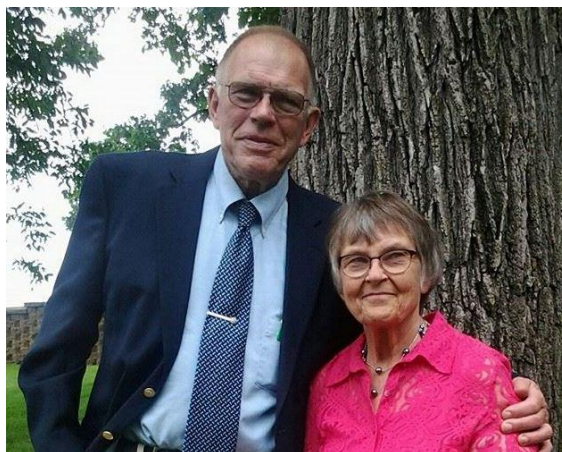
Betty's sister, Judy, is here tonight, too, and it is so good to see her again.



Dave Vietmeier tells Jim that he has a nephew living in Pennsylvania. Jim surprises Dave by telling him that he has met Jeff. It is a small world! Dave is still farming and he and Shirley have lived the same place for so many years.

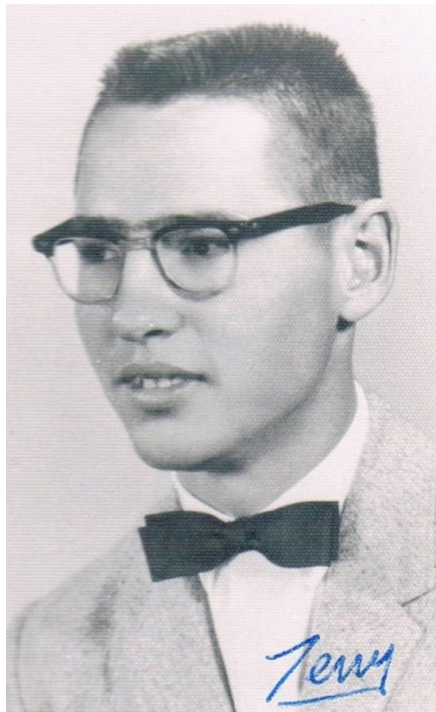


We sit with Dick and Diane Buss Van Raden at dinner.



They tell us that they are taking a train trip in October, the same tour that Donna Cornelius will be on. Diane and I discuss the beauty of the world around us and decide that bored people are really just unhappy people. Diane and Dick have traveled extensively.

Terry Mathiot is in fine form and informs me that the reason his wife Barb looks so young is because she is his wife.



Terry is the fellow who confesses to wearing the wrong name tag when greeting people at his church, just to confuse them.

Ron Ludwig and I were co-editors of the high school annual in 1961 and Ron reminds me of the uproar we caused when classmates were led to believe that the cover of that edition would be lavender (my favorite color).



Pretty Judy Ross Greenfield is thrilled to report that she and Loran became grandparents again last night and

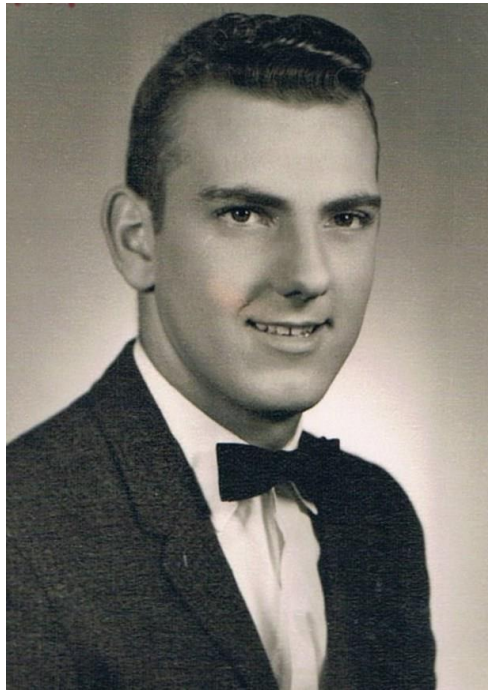
several more grandchildren are due this summer.



Judy remembers the afternoon so many years ago when she and Rose Marie Buttel Thompson visited my homeplace and we played in the attic. In turn, I remember the birthday party at her childhood home. Aren't shared memories with classmates fun?



Larry Ludwig and his wife Sandra sit at our table.



This is Larry's first class reunion since graduating. Larry is a comfortable guy to be around and shares with Jim that he, too, is a mold injection specialist.

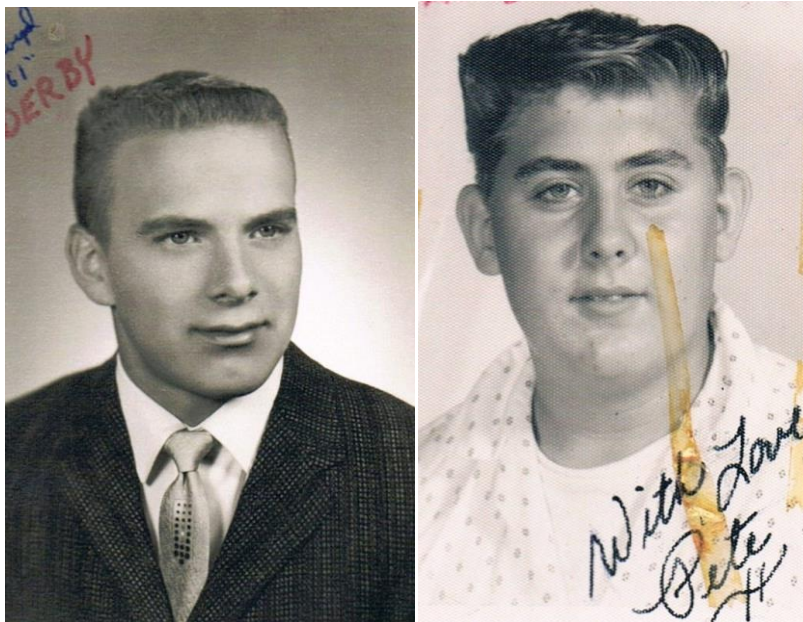
Bill Ackerman stops by our table and tells me that he is engaged. Oh, Bill, I am so happy for you. You are such a good person!



Wiley Lynch's wife Carol valiantly tries to keep him on track tonight with his emcee duties. The reunion committee tells of all the good times they had planning tonight's festivities. One meeting, at the home of Sandy Gravenstein Rogers, was held during a January snowstorm and she thought she would have the whole crew there overnight.



Floyd Derby was really “into” finding classmates and, at one point, was ready to hop in his vehicle and drive to Michigan to hunt for Pete Lambrecht.



The committee is named for our next reunion and the jokes fly concerning the possibility of planning meetings being held in various nursing homes.

Rich Masterson, now a California resident, reminds us of the peaceful and traffic-free setting of this Northern Illinois area.



Aljean Frisbie Webb shares her feelings about driving past her childhood home and realizing that she has no family left in Forreston. She hopes the new owners will take care of her old home.



Gary Koch pays tribute to our recently deceased class member, Jerry Guth.



(Gary and I reminisced earlier tonight about the day his wife Sharon's students TP'd a tree in Gary's front yard as Gary and his daughter sat quietly beneath the tree, obscured by low-hanging branches. Such a surprise those kids had!)



Carol Jean Meyer Midthun and I find a quiet spot and she tells me of the events in her life. We have been friends since ninth grade.



Below back row L to R: Dave Ruter, Dave Vietmeier, Larry Hinders, Ron Ludwig, Floyd Derby(in white shirt), Larry Ludwig, Gary Koch,(black shirt), Leo Korf, Bill Ackerman, Terry Mathiot (black shirt). Middle row: Duska Haijenga Ruter, Rich Masterson, Lin Saaijenga Moseley, Carol Meyer Midthun, Wiley Lynch, Jack Grigsby (blue shirt) and Aljean Frisbie Webb. Front row: Judy Ross Greenfield, Barb DeVries Zuspenn, Diane Buss VanRaden, Betty Kitzmiller Remmers, Faye Smith Bailey, Denise DeGraff Lane, Shirley Kilker Vietmeier, Elaine Heeren Hayunga, Sandy Gravenstein Rogers. Wow! What a crew!



All evening the cameras have been flashing but it is finally time to get everyone lined up for a group picture. Classmates' spouses rise to the occasion and it looks like a lightning storm in that banquet hall. More pictures are taken of various class members pointing to their names on the class quilt.



This group shares a connection with other classmates that is unique. All of us have busy, full lives but no one else in the world except our own classmates can fill exactly the same spot in our hearts and memories.

And then, amid hugs and tears, the Forreston Class of '61 forty-five-year reunion is completed. Reunions are a great deal like weddings; you plan for them for a year and, after five or six hours, everything is over. At midnight we walk away from the Four Seasons. On the way to the parking lot Rich talks about the day he took the family car for a spin and hit a neighbor's vehicle. The neighbor was not nearly as concerned about the damage to his car as he was about Rich's dad's reaction to the news.

Strangely, I shed no tears as we leave Freeport. This surprises me. I've had my "Illinois fix" and now it is time to go home to Virginia to see my kids and grandkids. Many years ago I heard a term used in old English movies and now it is appropriate to use that term, "Home, James!"

An hour and a half later we arrive at the Rochelle Railpark. People are in the pavilion as trains are passing. We lean back our seats and pull out a couple of pillows. Jim is immediately sawing wood. A couple pulls up beside us in a sleek little black car. He looks to be about fifty and she, dressed in a fluffy blue strapless dress, is about twenty. They stand in the parking lot, passing a “cigarette” between them. The longer they smoke that thing, the gigglier she becomes. My Honeywell buddy, Josh Cropper, used to call that type of cigarette “wacky tobacco”. My lights go out about the time the couple decides to leave but I am vaguely aware of trains passing as we sleep.

Five a.m. We are wide awake and aiming the little red Cavalier southward along Interstate 39. Soon the navy-blue landscape turns into silhouettes of trees and barns and grain bins as July second slowly claims the light of day. South of the majestic Illinois River a gentle rain does a fine job of clearing the bugs off our windshield. Those barn and bin silhouettes begin to turn white or silver and the earth is again lush green. It’s gonna be another good day for travel.

In search of a couple of sausage biscuits, we turn off the Interstate and are face to face with an F134F Thunder Cat army plane. We wonder what stories that airplane could tell. Because our watches are set to Eastern Daylight time and the locals are on Central time, the fast food joints are not yet open so we continue on our way. Corduroy-textured clouds are stacked in front of the “pinkening” morning sky ahead of us. White slats, incorporated into woven-wire fences along the road, are a reminder of the raging snowstorms that can blow across this flatland on much colder days. An abundance of cell phone towers bespeaks our modern society’s thirst for instant connection. The morning sun is burning its way between the clouds as we spot another deceased deer amid shreds of truck tires, strewn on the roadside shoulders. Many times before I’ve traveled this road except, this time, it leads me toward home instead of away from home.

At LeRoy, Illinois, the local McDonald’s and the local time coordinate with our hungry tummies for a sausage biscuit and some welcome hot coffee. So far, we have traveled 1258 miles since Wednesday evening. Champaign brings back memories of the day Sandi and I were in this town for testing she needed in order to attend the University of Illinois. We arrived at eight a.m. on a sunny day and spotted one of the collage kids’ latest projects. They had completely decorated a large tree by one dorm with pink -- Yes, PINK! -- toilet paper and it was gorgeous. The morning sun made the fluttering pink paper glow against a backdrop of dark green leaves.

I complain that factories should be required to post signs telling passersby exactly what is being manufactured. Jim suggests that I write to the governor about this problem. Hmmmmm. Good thought. Near Danville, Illinois, we pull off to get a closer look at CSX locomotives on a siding in Brewer Yards.



This is also a good opportunity to retrieve a couple of Cokes from the cooler in the trunk.

9:10 a.m. and the Indiana state line. Home is getting closer. At 10:30 we are on a bypass around Indianapolis and think of services just beginning at the brand-new Thomas Road Church in Lynchburg. We hope the sun is shining there, too, this morning for their first services in the church.



Truckloads of carnival rides are on the move. We spend a good many miles discussing the many people Jim met last night. Soon we cross the Kentucky line and travel along AA-9 Highway across the top of the state. It has two lanes of gentle curves with passing lanes on most hills. This time it is daylight and we can see the pretty scenery. There are no mountains right here but the hills are serious. Cattle are swishing their tails under pasture trees. It is hot for them. The moms are grazing while calves are tucked among the cool grass for their naps. The farther east we go, the more intense the hills become. Sawmills, small tobacco plots, and fields of freshly-baled hay share the hillsides. Highway AA-10 leads us through mini mountains, then the Ohio River is directly ahead of us.

Ah, Huntington, West Virginia, and a Super 8 Motel! We stopped earlier today to call ahead for reservations for tonight. Supper at Bob Evans does its job, then we sleep through the TV programs at the motel.

6:40 a.m. on July third. It is sticky this morning as we drive through the parking lot. There are vehicles here from Ontario, Colorado, Georgia, South and North Carolina, Illinois, and Kentucky. We are such a mobile society. The sun ahead of us is an eerie orangish glow, much like something from a science fiction movie. No worry! That sun will soon blaze its way around the morning haze. Traffic seems a bit heavy today. There has been lots of road construction this whole trip. Apparently those roads “up North” took an awful beating from Old Man Winter’s heavy hand or traffic this past year.

I am getting antsy to get home and see my kids and grandkids. They will be the icing on this marvelous trip. But first, let’s just inhale the sights ahead of us and glory in this world God has provided. I am constantly amazed at the sameness of people and “things” all across our country. Vehicles in Northern Illinois look exactly the same as those in Georgia, Maine, or Virginia. Most stores are national chains and a walk through Walmart anywhere yields the same basic products, selling for the same prices. People from east to west watch the same things on TV and wear the same styles. Donna Cornelius and I share our enjoyment of the same comic strips in our local papers, even though we live almost a thousand miles apart. The only real difference between United States areas is the topography-pretty amazing considering the history accounts of our diverse forefathers. Saturday night at the reunion Rich commented that our local classmates should realize what a unique place they call home. There are no traffic jams like the big cities and rural flavor is so strong. This is true, but I maintain that one of the major differences is the population density-not the material things our local classmates own and use. People everywhere seem to fall into one of two classifications-either friendly or terribly unhappy.

Near St. Albans, West Virginia, eastbound traffic grinds to a halt and headlights stretch behind us as far as we can see. Good old road construction! Randy Niffenegger once told me that Wisconsin has two seasons: winter season and road repair season. That, too, seems to be the same all across our land. OOPS! Turns out it wasn't construction after all. A red semi looks the worse for wear and squad cars are parked along the road at the east edge of the bridge over the Kanawha River.



Traffic soon cooks again.

Charleston is a city of tall buildings and scores of bridges over the Kanawha River. I think back to 1996 when Sis Marion and her Kelly and my kids' dad and I traveled this way on our way to Cindy and Freddie's wedding. I was in awe then of the way roads threaded their way through this city...still am. We soon make the turn south toward Beckley.



Today the muted sunlight makes the gold-covered capitol dome look like fine satin.



South of town we stop for gas. An eastbound coal train is passing by and I jot down the locomotive numbers.

Wednesday night the industry along the river near Marmet was a city of lights. Today they are all haze and smokestacks.

The tollway to Beckley leads us into a deep canyon of trees and rock. How unbelievably magnificent! Daisies and black-eyed Susans are planted in a narrow slice of curve. A thicket of bright red raspberries gains a toe-hold partway down a crumbling cliff. Crown vetch and chicory gently guard the berries' roots. Coal seams horizontally divide the walls beside us. Rivulets of water ooze from between the rocks and their sparkles reflect the sun.

We travel the five miles of seven-percent grade to descend Sandstone Mountain and pass trucks, their engines roaring complaints against the effects of gravity.

Ah, Meadow Creek, West Virginia!



This is a peaceful village beside the New River. Baskets of petunias hang from porches and lush gardens peek from behind neat little houses. Jim is happy as he snaps yet another picture of a passing train. During the last several trips here we have been watching the progress of folks who are building a house around a mobile home. Headway is being made with new vinyl siding along the front but there is still plenty left to do. We stop at the Sandstone Visitors' Center.



Attendant, Kathy, whose mom-in-law lives in Freeport, is not there today. Don't you just know, I come out of there with another book, Log Cabin Pioneers by Wayne Erbsen. This book instructs me on the finer points of baking ash cakes. Jim has good eating ahead..... An eastbound train passes and I notice it is the same one we saw south of Charleston.

I64 Eastbound's serpentine curves are ahead of us, the sun is playing peek-a-boo with thickening clouds above us, and haze is "bluing" the mountains. A brown pickup truck from Arkansas passes us. He has the cargo area heaped with old, beat-up bikes and we wonder where he is going with such a questionable treasure.

White Sulphur Springs is a good place to grab a sandwich.



We sit in the parking lot by the Amtrak stop and listen to noon church chimes. It is just so peaceful. Soon we are on our way again. Now the sky is grumbling while streaks of lightning lick the mountaintops. Rain splatters our windshield as we get back on the Interstate.

July third, 3:20 p.m. Remember, this story is about reunionS. We pull up into Cindy and Freddie's driveway and jockey for a parking spot.



There are vehicles here from New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Georgia, North Carolina, and, of course, Virginia. We can hear the kids squealing with joy behind the house so we go inside to investigate. Oh, such happy turmoil greets us. Ten little kids, all less than ten-years-old, have free-reign of the place. We join twelve adults and two teen-agers, also in that house for the week. Hugs abound! I get to meet my newest grandson, Isaac (born March tenth) and he is a real "keeper!"



Jim and I bring in the Mrs. Mikes and my gang is happy.



Jim also hands them the one empty bag. For somebody who does not especially care for those chips, he did seem to find a way to munch them down during our travels. I understand that Randy sent ahead four or five bags and Sue C/J sent five pounds by UPS. None of those are left so my family attacks the ones we brought. Like I said before, “It’s an acquired taste.”

In the back yard is a huge colorful heap of plastic. It is the deflated “Inflatable Bouncer” from Kidz Jump. Earlier this afternoon a storm forced its deflation and now the kids are ready for it again. Ryan seems to be the “inflator of choice” and the kids are soon inside the thirteen-foot by thirteen-foot “bouncer”, jumping and laughing.



Such a lot of energy those kids are expending! They should sleep soundly tonight.



A few of the "older" kids join in the fun:



All too soon the owners of the attraction arrive (It was rented for four or five hours.) and the kids lose their toy. Oh, well, they always have the pool and that is exactly where they head. We sit poolside and I marvel at my family. How I love them! When my kids were growing up, I never-in-the-world dreamed I would have so many precious grandchildren. My free-wheeling thoughts take me back to the summer my five took swimming lessons at the Oakdale swimming pool near Freeport. Opal Wilhelms did a fine job of teaching them and now a new generation is taking to the water like ducks.



More of the "big kids" were in fine form:



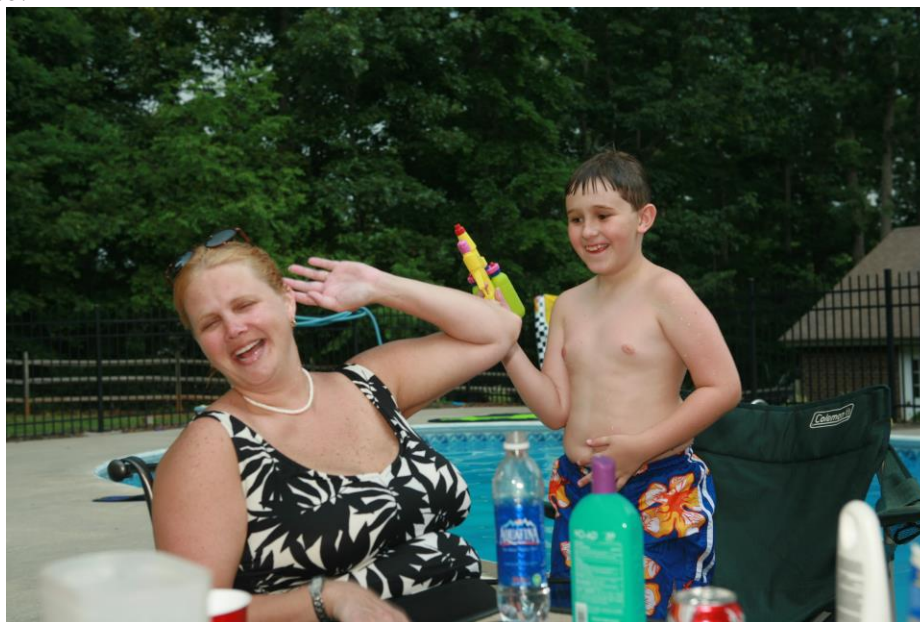
Jim and I are worn-out so we beg off staying for supper and go home to unpack this car, after traveling 1,967 miles.

Early on Independence Day we are back at Cindy's home for breakfast and a day of celebrating family.



It feels so good to see them all together again. I hope they continue the tradition of gathering each Fourth of July week.

Just before noon Larry and Randy decide to go to our home to get the kinks out of our computer. They have their work cut out for them. I cook a big pot of spaghetti for my boys and Jim as my sons click and key and growl; then the puzzles of cyberspace yield to their expertise and our computer is tamed for the time being. Soon it is time to go back to Cindy's home for supper and family pictures. Sandy Turel takes over the camera as we all line up for a family photo.



This is a normal part of our family reunions. I know I will treasure these photos and the memories that go with them.

Below, back row L to R: Mark Parsons, Randy Faist holding Isaac, Jim and me, Jeff McCarthy, Larry Faist, Fred Watson holding Ben. Center row: Dalton Allaben (Jill's), Sandi Parsons, Monica Faist holding Miranda, Jill Allaben (one of my Daughters-of-The Heart), Lori McCarthy, Ellen Faist, Cindy Watson, Matthew McCarthy (Lori's). Front: Ryan McCarthy (Lori's); Justin Parsons (Sandi's); Abby Watson (Cindy's); Emma, (Larry's) Amelia (Randy's) and Anna Faist (Larry's); Morgan Parsons (Sandi's).



The Fourth of July ends with a backyard show of fireworks by Jeff as the little kids whirl their sparklers in the dark.





I savor the moment and wish it was possible to stop time for a little while. This old grandma's heart is overflowing. I am so very blessed with a large and wonderful family, a loving husband, and a home of peace. I have the best of both worlds: pleasant memories of so many special people in Illinois and my gentle life in Virginia.

This marks the end of our reunion saga. We hope you have shared some of the excitement and love we experienced during the past week. Who knows when our next adventure will take wings! Now....about climbing that purple bridge in Cincinnati---- anybody care to join me?