

Would you like to join us on a trip to Wisconsin today?

Wisconsin 2007

June 8, 2007...11:20AM. After a quick “Good bye” to neighbor Ruth, we set out on our latest adventure. This is beloved Ruth:



Lists are checked and suitcases are bulging. Chicago, here we come!

Friend Patricia, once again, wimped out on her promise to join us on our trip. She volunteered to bring along a baked ham for Jim but, instead, sent him a picture of a pig by e-mail last night. He will bring back left-overs for her. That's Pat below:



The bank thermometers show 90 degrees and it is sticky and hazy as we point the little red Cavalier toward Clifton Forge's Amtrak station. Jim comments that it is fortunate that we both can enjoy the scenery along the way every bit as much as we anticipate our destination. Oh, it is so good to be at a point in life where we can take time to smell the roses along our path. Traffic is fairly heavy today. A jaunty red pickup truck zooms around us. His cargo is a large bright Confederate flag, flapping in the wind. Orange day lilies and spiky white yucca blossoms decorate the roadsides.

Lawns are manicured for the weekend and farmers are busy baling up their crops of green-gold hay. Clifton Forge's lampposts each sport lush hanging baskets of red, white, and blue petunias or red/orange New Guinea impatiens. Bright pink sweet peas twine their way along porch railings. Center medians are splashed with patches of yellow lemon lilies. Wild vines have almost completely covered an abandoned home and it looks so lonely.

A call to Amtrak assures us that our train is only seventeen minutes late so we go to the local restaurant for a good warm meal to hold us for the long trip ahead --- and it takes more than thirty minutes to be served. Oh, dear! We snarf down the food, leave a good bit uneaten, and then quickly drag our suitcases to the station. Two hours later the train comes into view.



Our coach is cool and full of travelers as we settle in with pillows and snacks. Some of that supper we left sitting on our plates at the restaurant would be mighty tasty about now.

Ethan is seven years old and a total delight. He and his daddy have been to Washington, DC so he sports a brand new souvenir tee shirt. Dad's faded shirt proclaims, "The abuse will stop when morale improves". The man has tattooed snakes and webs covering his arms and oodles of hoops attached to his ears. But his eyes sparkle with kindness and he is obviously crazy about his son, exhibiting gentleness and love beyond belief toward Ethan and the other passengers. I wonder about his life. Ethan is a normal little kid, saying, "Cheese, cheese!" as he snaps his own picture and points at the "awesome" scenery as we rock and roll our way through the New River Gorge. They leave us at Ashland, Kentucky, but I sleep through that stop and miss telling him, "Good Bye."

Sleep is fitful but works for us. And we both snooze our way through Cincinnati. Phooey! I wanted to watch for the Purple People Bridge. I wrote about this attraction in my story, "Reunions Ahead", but understand that it has been closed down for lack of climbers. Apparently, the

30,000 people a year that the organizers expected to pay \$60 each to climb the bridge just never showed up. Bummer!



A hint of daylight wakes us as we stop about sixty miles southeast of Indianapolis. Gradually, our window reveals farm country with fields of beans and corn. Fencelines and the roadsides are alive with white elderberry blooms. Oh, I am back in my beloved farm country again! Agriculture seems to seep deep within the very core of me, even though I love my new home in Virginia and would never move back to the Midwest. Nary a cloud mars the pinkish-blue sky this morning and the sun dances off red and white barns, and blue Harvestores, crisp white fences around houses, and fields of young corn as far as we can see.



Several startled deer race away from the train tracks. It's gonna be an excellent day! The poet, Joyce Kilmer, perhaps described this very morning when he wrote, "The air is like a butterfly with frail blue wings. The happy earth looks at the sky and sings."

The engineer seems to have engaged the after-burner and we fly through the countryside, whistle wailing at every road crossing. A little white yapping drop-kick dog races just inside the safety of his house yard fence as we pass by. Friend Patricia, you would love this! It is early Saturday morning in the flatlands of central Indiana and all is well.

Saturday, 12:45PM....two and a half hours late and ten minutes after our bus has left for Janesville, Amtrak locomotive number 194 pulls into Union Station at Chicago. Randy tells us he will "come git" so we do not have to wait for the five o'clock bus. Ah, yes, time enough for solid food instead of snacks. We share a table in the food court with Sarah, a lovely young lady from Rochester, New York, and find a new friend. She is a treasure. Her summer plans include college courses in Colorado.

Next stop, the Great Hall and my mind is immersed in the history of this fantastic place. I am rubbing shoulders with immigrants and presidents alike. (But not Jim-----he is out cruising the building. Hope he doesn't accidentally get on a train to Schenectady or Seattle.) The hand-cut marble flooring has long cracks spider-webbing from massive gold pillars and the gold leaf on the very old lamp posts is peeling in spots.



This hall will soon need lots of love -- and money -- to keep its original beauty intact. My mind is jolted back to today by the jingle of our cell phone. Randy is about fifteen minutes away.

The gray Honda Accord glides to a stop at the Jackson Street entrance and Randy helps us load up our gear. Then starts the “white knuckle” trip through downtown Chicago traffic. You either “kick it” or get kicked so you better keep up with the flow here. Randy is used to this stuff but this old mom’s edge has faded since leaving Illinois seven years ago. The “vaguely familiar” landmarks of previous visits are almost unrecognizable to me today so I settle back and just enjoy the scenery of our latest vacation destination. I am simply here to visit people -- not the place anymore. Near Janesville we pass a sign for a pork festival at the local fairgrounds. Perhaps Jim could pick up some ham to bring back to Pat.

Soon we pull up to Randy and Monica’s lovely home:

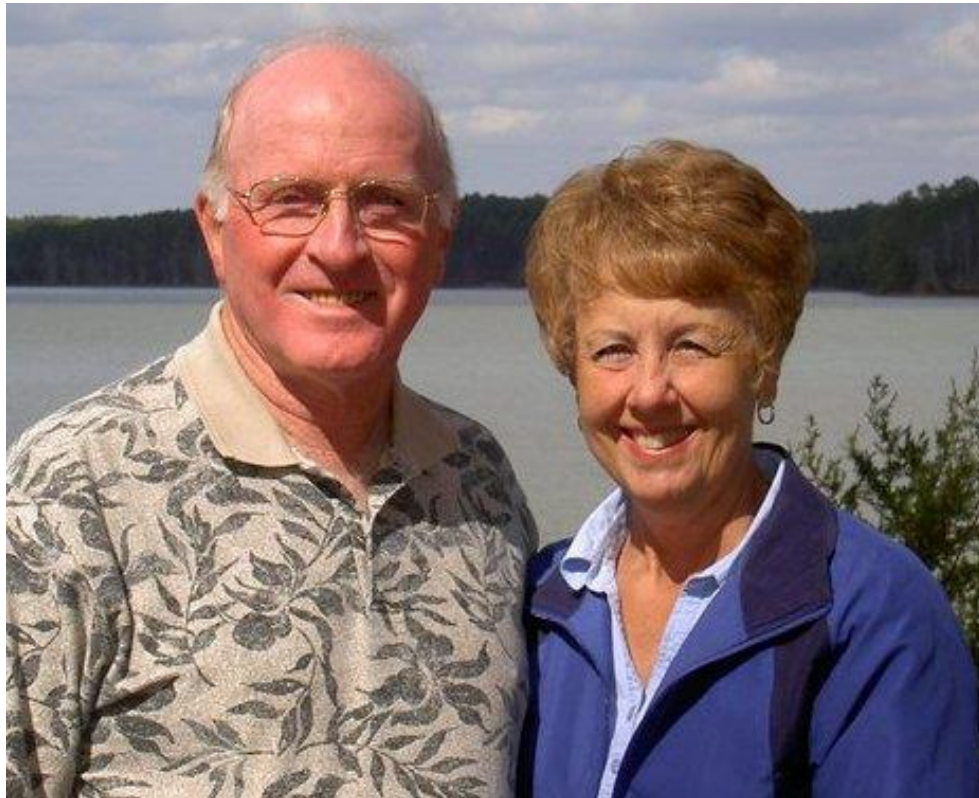


This house is lively with three little kids and it is a hoot watching their antics.



We sit on the upper deck and listen to the low murmur of the cicada invasion. They come every seventeen years and this is their showcase year.

Sunday morning. I head back for that upper deck but hear what I think is a siren. No, those cicadas have become serious and it is a screechy, whistley din all around me. There must be fifty kazillion of those guys out there in the woods. Our day is spent just enjoying each other, then Cousin Dick and his wife Joann stop by for a visit. They are on their way home to Rockford from a trip to Toledo but come the extra miles to meet Jim. It is so good to touch hearts with them.



Amelia is deeply engrossed in the cicada event and brings numerous ones into the house to show us. Joann shivers as one of the little buggers crawls up Amelia's arm. Jo passes on the suggestion that she, too, could experience this once-in-seventeen-year pleasure.

Chef Randy prepares chicken on the grill to go along with Monica's yummy roasted veggies for our supper. We finish it off with bowls of Sand Castle Cake, a delectable dessert which Amelia created for us. Mmmmm!



Three-year-old Miranda has a problem.



She was reaching for a toy in the toybox, lost her balance, and fell in...head first. Little brother, Isaac promptly closes the lid on her.



Monday, June 11 is Amelia's last day of third grade. This fall she will advance to a larger school. Jim and Monica walk to the bus stop to see her off, then Randy takes Jim and me for a tour of his workplace, the Kaney Aerospace Center at Rockford Airport (fifty miles from his home).



Randy and Jeff Kaney have been buddies since kindergarten. Now they are in cahoots on projects which boggle my mind. In the hanger is a Boeing 737, the vehicle of choice for experimenting with the concept of wireless access to the internet for every airline passenger.



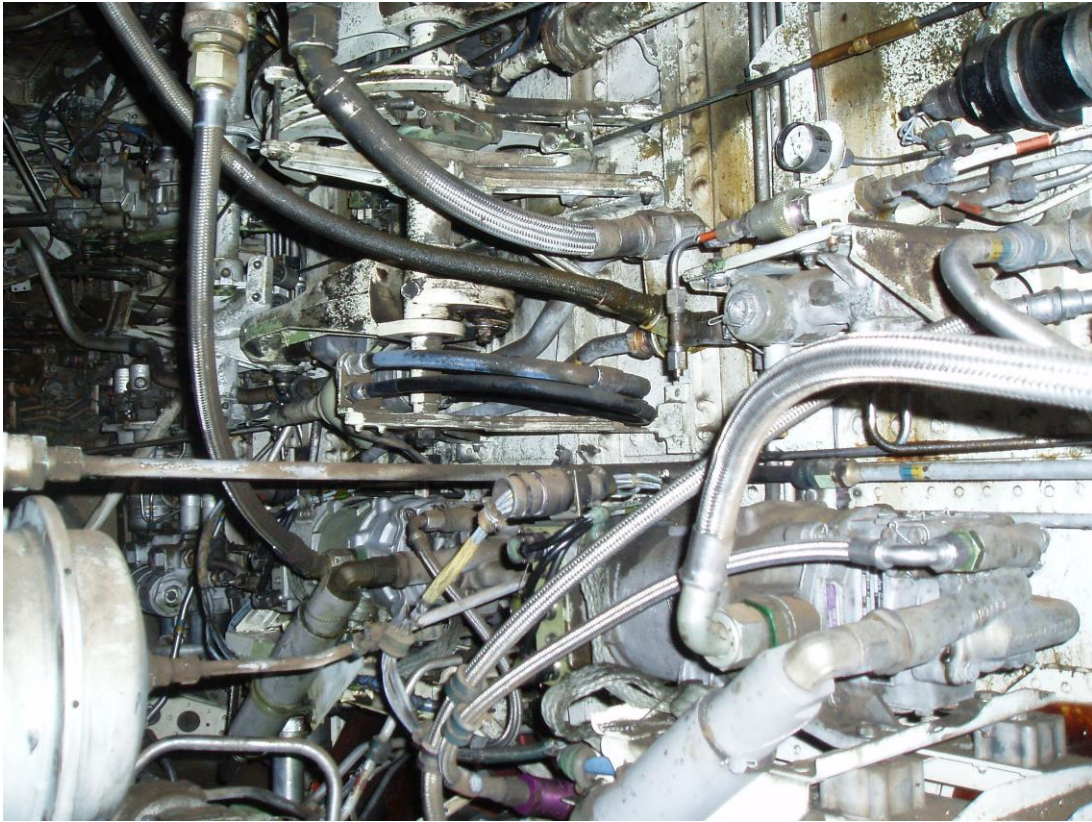
Each seat inside bears a laptop. This is where the bugs are being worked out of the project.



What a maze of gauges and switches in this cockpit:



Inside the wheel wells are spaghetti-bowl masses of wires and cables:



Bill, the maintenance man, fires up the 737 so we can get an up-close view of how the flaps and slats on the plane adjust for landing.



Tucked beside the large plane is bright yellow 1943 Piper Cub, a stunning contrast to modern technology. Its skin is made of fabric and it looks like a toy by comparison. Handyman Joe keeps busy wiping up dirt and grease from the white epoxy floor of the hanger. He has that floor glowing!

Randy is hand-building a Lanceair IV-P, which is also at the hanger. Its wings are still being built in Randy's garage so the fuselage looks a bit forlorn but it shows great potential.



In another corner sits the shiny red 1963 Pitts S1B biplane. Jeff has flown this little gem in air show competition.



Snuggled in one area of the building is the boys' latest endeavor, a thermal chamber test unit. Insulation in the walls is rated at R50 and the ceiling is R60. It is capable of testing aeronautical components for structural integrity at temperatures ranging from -94 degrees to +212 degrees....a really great place to bake a chocolate cake, then quick freeze it, huh? Randy jokes that the lights in Rockford dim when they fire up the test unit. I am so very proud of my son! That's the test chamber behind Randy and Joe:



I find a vehicle that is a bit closer to my piloting skills:



Randy and Jim humor me with stop at Rockford's Hobby Lobby where I find the music buttons for plastic canvas projects plus three new pattern books, then we head back to Janesville.

After supper Randy, Amelia, Jim, and I meet at the square brown game table in the upstairs greatroom and play a cut-throat game of Monopoly. (Jim skunks the rest of us despite claims of not remembering how to play the game.) This is the table before Randy and Monica had it refinished:



This same table was in my parents' kitchen for so many years; the memories flood through me.



(Please disregard Larry's look of concentration in the above 1968 picture.)

That table was also a good place to sit them down for a serious discussion...like Geekee Gramma would ever read the riot act to her little angels.....



Tuesday, June 12. The cicadas are in fine form this morning and serenade us. After a leisurely morning with plenty of hugs from grandkids, Randy drops us off at the bus station. Soon our chariot arrives and we begin our homeward trek. Leaving this place is no problem but leaving behind loved ones pulls my tears. My emotions are on my sleeve today. Jim just pats my arm;

he understands.

Our bus detours through O Hare Airport so now Jim can officially say that he has been there. We chat with a young man from Wausau, Wisconsin, who will be teaching summer school for underprivileged children in Chicago. He isn't quite sure what to expect but is eager to face the challenge. Wish we could introduce him to our friend Sarah whom we met at the food court a few days ago. They seem like a good match.

After stop-and-go traffic along the Chicago streets, our bus eventually deposits us at Union Station.



We find the correct place to wait for our train's departure and sit in a crowded waiting room. Laughter erupts near the door as we recognize our favorite conductor, Mr. Sparks. His route is from Indianapolis to Chicago and we have talked to him several times before. He shares that he will only be working about eighteen more months before retirement. Amtrak will lose a good ambassador then. He keeps everybody laughing with his jokes and wisecracks and is able to sooth frayed tempers when trains are behind schedule.

frequent stops are the order of the evening.

Our train leaves the station only a bit late but we are behind a freight so This affords us PLENTY of time to watch some of the seedier areas of Chicago pass by.

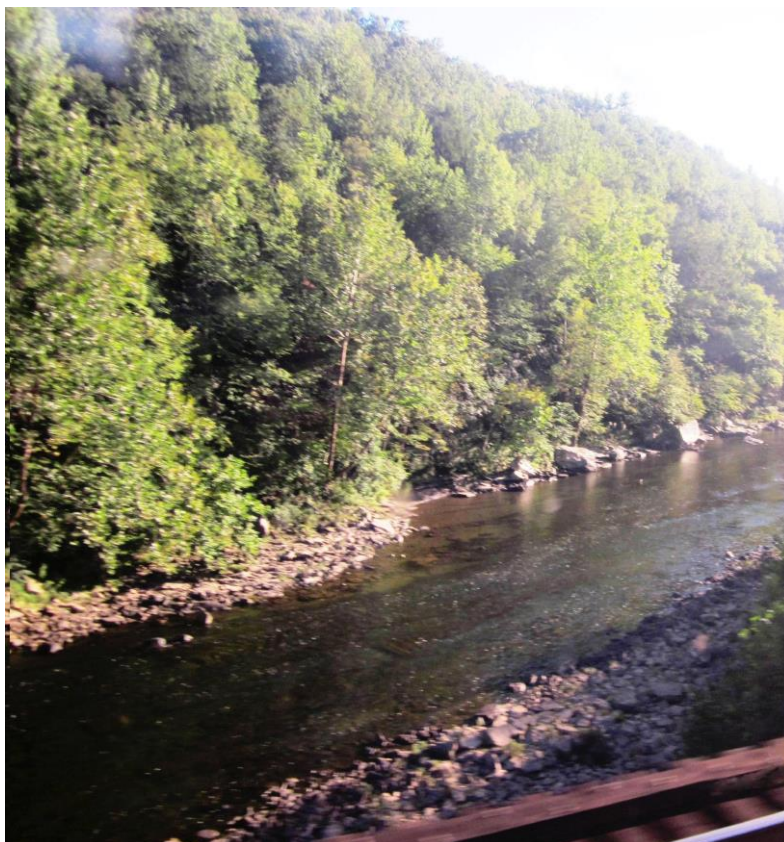


Two hours later we are all of thirty miles from the station. It could be a long night ahead.....

Consciousness reappears somewhere in Kentucky as the sun glistens off the mighty Ohio River. Huge round bales of hay dot the fields beside us and we ride along in the peaceful morning light. Oh, oh! Vandalers have cut some wires so the signals are not working properly in West Virginia. We putz along at fifteen miles an hour -- more time to enjoy the incredible beauty of the New River Gorge.



We travel along the Greenbrier River near Ronceverte, West Virginia:



Five hour behind schedule, Amtrak 50 arrives in Clifton Forge. We load our gear once more into the little red Cavalier and head east toward home. It has been an excellent trip. Our goal was to spend time with family and this we have done. My heart is warm and my mind is full of good memories. Aristophanes, the Greek playwright, suggested that, "A man's homeland is wherever he prospers." For me now, Lynchburg is truly home.



Life is good. God is Great!

