

## WESTWARD HO!

Tuesday, October 4, 2005/Kansas City Missouri

**Can you tell us how to get to “Oklahoma Joe’s”?**

It is early, very early! 2:45 a.m. Tuesday October 4, 2005 finds Al and me sitting on the edge of our bed groggy and rubbing our eyes. Why is the clock alarm blaring in our ears at this time of night? Oh, yes. That’s right. This is it! This is the day we have been waiting for ever since that night in May when Earlene telephoned us with the most amazing invitation. Would Al and I consider joining Bob and Earlene on a 2 week car tour in the Midwest? Their plans were set. Would we meet them in Kansas City, Missouri the morning of Oct 4<sup>th</sup> and tour Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming for a 2 week period? It didn’t take us long to decide. We had been thinking about taking such a trip ourselves but had not made definite plans. Now we had two wonderful friends to travel with!

The next night I telephoned Earlene back.

“Yes,” I said. “We will make the trip with you.”

“You will?!” Earlene squealed incredulously. “You really will?!”

I was just as excited. I felt like a child that had been handed the most wonderful gift. And I had. This was the gift of trusting friendship and the gift of wonder. God is soooooooooo good!

Today is the day of our departure from Bradley Airport in Hartford. Kansas City here we come!

Time is short. We down our glasses of orange juice and I grab the last two slices of cinnamon raisin bread from the refrig. These will do fine for our breakfast later on.

We load the car and off we go.

We spent the day yesterday cleaning windows and doing yard work. I wanted the house and grounds to look perfect the two weeks we were away. Al doesn’t think that makes any sense. We won’t even see the house and yard during that time. But I give him “the look” and we get the work done.

In the waiting room at Bradley Airport I talk with a smiling woman who tells me, “My husband and I live in Florida. We are returning home today after visiting our son here. We don’t have any more trees shading our house because they were destroyed during 2 hurricanes last year. The house is fine but what a job it was to clean up after the hurricanes.”

Our first flight is taking us to Washington D.C. where we will change planes for Kansas City. Wow. Look over there out this plane window. Do you see the beautiful pink and blue hues? This sun is rising! What hope and promise it brings.

The clouds outside the window are so thick together it looks like I could walk on them.

We find out connection in Washington easily. Now we are flying over the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is beautiful sight.

On this flight I browse through the “Sky Mall” magazine found in the pocket in front of my seat. Did you know you can buy a “Hot Dog Pop Up Cooker”? Yup, just put your two “dogs” in the center of the machine and put one hot dog roll on either side.

Push the button and in a few minutes you get warm cooked hot dogs and rolls. I am not crazy about hot dogs but this makes me laugh. It is like a pop up toaster.

We can also buy a projector for our front yard which will throw up the illusion of falling snow on the front of our house. I don't think sooo

Now we are in Kansas City awaiting the arrival of Bob and Earlene on Delta Airlines.

When Earlene telephoned Kansas City Information a couple of months ago, the young lady said,

“You want to come to Kansas?! Why would anyone want to do that? I've lived here all my life and I just want to get out!”

I don't think she means Kansas is that bad...she just wants to see something else for a change. Change is always stimulating.

Al takes a walk through the airport and reports, “I saw the sign that says the tornado shelter is located downstairs.”

Now I know I am in Kansas for sure. The airport book store is selling copies of “The Wizard of Oz” and that is another clue.

We step outside the airport terminal and right into summer heat! It is 85 degrees out! We were not expecting this. A red shuttle bus takes us to a different terminal for Delta Airlines and we hop out eager to meet Bob and Earlene flying in from Bangor, Maine.

There they are! Much excitement and chatter. Then we board the “Dollar Rental” shuttle bus that takes us to the rental store where we sign papers for a silver colored Dodge Caravan Mini Van.

“Can you tell us how to get to Oklahoma Joe's?” asks Earlene. We hear they have really great barbeque food.”

“Sure,” says the rental gal. “I know because it is right across the street from my hairdresser.”

After following her directions and becoming hopelessly lost, we conclude the girl has forgotten where her hair dresser is! We stop and ask and this time we find Oklahoma Joe's miles and miles away inside the Shamrock gas station store. I order the pulled pork sandwich on a bun and it is really delicious with the barbeque sauce on top.

The rest of the afternoon Al drives us along Route 56 in Missouri on and on.....on and on ....through the Kansas farmlands. We are out under the spacious blue skies we have all heard about. So much sky and so much space! What a feeling of openness as we follow the Santa Fe pioneer trail. Each farmhouse looks like the one where Auntie Em lives. I keep looking for the tornado that will drive Dorothy, Toto, Auntie Em etc. into the storm cellar!

I can feel those wagon trains rumbling on through the open spaces and without really trying I find myself humming and singing, **“Oklahoma!”** , **“Home On The Range”**, **“This Land Is Your Land”**, **“God Bless America”** and **“America The Beautiful”**. Now I know what it feels like to under the “spacious skies”.

We want to drive to Emporia but we settle for Council Grove since “we can't get there from here!,” as Earlene says. The roads to Emporia are all marked “Detour”.

The Main Street of Council Grove looks like something out of the cowboy movies we used to watch on TV! But the streets do not ring with gun shots and victims falling off their horses. You can hear it none the less inside yourself.

We are staying at the Cottage Hotel a nice old bed & breakfast type of place. Earlene and I take a walk along the river and meet Al and Bob at the **Hays Inn** for dinner. This old Inn has been founded by Daniel Boone's great grandson. So now to bed. It's been a very long day.

### Wednesday October 5, 2005/Council Grove, Kansas

#### **The barrels of whiskey or grandmother's dining room table?**

I awaken now in a strange bed and room. In an instant I remember where I am and the feel of excitement fills me. I have to share it with Al. It is 5:00 a.m.

"Al!"

"HmMMM?"

"Isn't it wonderful? We are in Council Grove, Kansas, right where the pioneer wagons rolled by on their way to New Mexico on the Santa Fe Trail!"

"Groooooan..."

"Can't you just hear the frontier wagons rumbling through the land? Can't you feel it? I love you!"

"I love you too. Now calm down."

I let him sleep. I take a walk through town for exercise, but I have to pause and gaze up and down the main street. It looks like a main street cow boy town you sometimes see in the movies. The wide main street is paved with red brick and a sense of history is everywhere. This store used to be the "Last Chance" supply place for the pioneer families before they continued on their long trek to New Mexico, walking by foot next to their wagons laden down with the family furniture and all their household belongings. Among other necessities the men bought barrels of whiskey and carried them on their wagons! I wonder what happened when they got to the steep mountainous passes and had to lighten their load by leaving weighty objects behind? Did they leave grandmother's dining room table behind but keep the barrel of whiskey? It would be a matter of priorities.

After breakfast at the Cottage Inn the 4 of us drove to the market and stocked up on water and snacks. The towns are "few and far between" around here and we don't want to be caught without food or water. We also have to keep an eye on the gas tank and never get below half a tank. Gas stations are far apart also.

We drove to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve just outside of Strong City. For the next few hours we wandered through the Spring farmhouse, barn, ice house, outhouse and summer kitchen buildings. We roamed the prairie trail taking care not to trip on the stony paths or step on the...what is that lying in a pile on the path? It looks like blackberries...but just piled on the path like that? Later on our guide tells us it was probably raccoon scat!

Ron Clark is our park ranger and he takes us on a 90 minute guided bus tour of the tallgrass prairie land. He points out the many varieties of prairie grass and we get out of the van to stand in the vast expanse of prairie land. I can not tell you what it feels like to stand in the wide open space. You have to experience this yourself to understand the feeling. All I can say is that as you stand under the big dome of the sky and look from

horizon to horizon of treeless grass, it is overwhelming. I can only agree with Mark Twain who said,

“When I am under the big blue sky standing in the prairie grass, I feel like I am nothing and that I am erased.”

Ron tells us he comes out here with his breakfast every morning, sits on the prairie and watches the sun rise. Our God is an awesome God.

On our bus tour is another tourist and he is from Vermont. He tells us the joke about the man who asks, “What kind of cows do you have here on the Kansas farmland?”

“Basically we have two kinds. We have the black Angus cows and the brown and white cows we call the Hereford cows.”

“Well, what are **those** cows called? The ones lying over there on the ground?”

“We call them Ground Beef.”

We are sorry to leave the Tallgrass Prairie but we get back into our rented Dodge Caravan and continue our drive through Kansas. We stop for lunch at the “Emma Chase Café” in Cottonwood Falls where I have a pork sandwich with corn fries. All of us choose to have a slice of homemade pie for dessert a la mode. My peach pie was “out of this world.”

We now drive miles and miles past Kansas farmland...flatland. Just sky and flat farmland with a few trees here and there. Towns are tiny and far between. This is the prairie middle America and it is fascinating. The only people we see are the farmers who pass by on the road driving their big farm machines and cattle trucks.

Tonight we are at the Days Inn in Russell, Kansas tired and happy. Goodnight.

#### **Thursday October 6, 2005/ Russell, Kansas**

##### **“We watched the coffin go under.”**

This morning I woke up thinking about those pioneer wagon trains toiling up steep mountain passes. Hmmmm....

I spoke to Al who was sleeping.

“Honey?”

“Hmmmm....”

“If we were on a wagon heading out west and we came to a steep mountain and had to start leaving heavy objects behind so we could go on....”

“It wouldn’t be the whisky barrel,” he replied quickly.

“Would you leave **me** behind?”

“No, I’d need you to help push the wagon up the mountain.”

We drive to Victoria, Kansas this morning to tour the “Cathedral of the Plains”. This is easy to find as the twin towers of this Roman Catholic Church rises high above the flat plains. We can see it in the distance as we drive down the Interstate Highway.

The huge cathedral is constructed with limestone in 1911. As we walk inside we hear the strains of the organ and children’s voices raised in song. We walk down the center aisle of the church and wonder where the singing is coming from. We turn around and look up. The organ, organist and choir director are all in the back loft looking down on the Cathedral floor and front altar. It sounds like a large group of children are singing.

We explore the inside of the church: the altar, the stained glass windows and listen to the children's voices. It sounds so nice. Later on the choir director explains to us that there are 45 children in the choir and these are 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. They rehearse Thursday mornings early before school. The kids also take religious instructions here one day a week.

It is a beautiful cathedral filled with stained glass, marble topped tables, columns and brightly painted framed stations of the cross. Many of the parishioners are of German descent.

As we cross the border into Nebraska I read to everyone from my book WIDE AND LONESOME PRAIRIE. This is the diary of Hattie Campbell who travels across country in 1847 with her family from Booneville, Missouri – Oregon via their horse drawn wagon holding all their household goods. Hattie is 13 years old and today I read how her Uncle Milton was killed when he fell down from their roof while making repairs.

Hattie writes in her diary, “ My Uncle Milton died right there in the barnyard and there was nothing we could do. His funeral was today, one of the most interesting days in a very long time. It all started when his coffin fell out the side of our hay wagon and slid down the bank into the river.

Ma held the horses while Pa went after the coffin through mud and weeds. I hurried after Pa but my skirt caught in the brush. He grabbed the coffin and had his arms around it to haul it up, but just then a St. Louis steamboat rounded the bend with its big paddles churning up the water and making waves higher than Pa's head. He held on tight, but all of a sudden he floated out into those waves like a cork, me and Ma screaming for help.

Some folks on the top deck yelled until the captain pulled the whistle long and loud. Pa was being sucked into those tall white paddles when someone threw him a rope and pulled him aboard just in time.

We watched the coffin go under. Some moments later it popped free, its lid gone and Uncle Milton too. Where he went, we don't know, but this is how we came to be acquainted with the riverboat captain who felt so sorry for us that he said he'd take us anywhere we pleased, no charge.

“Anywheres?” Pa asked, as he stomped the water out of his boots.

“Yes sir, “ he said. “Anywhere.”

This very evening Pa made a shocking announcement: He said that because of the captain's kindness we can now afford to take a riverboat up to Independence, where the Oregon Trail begins. We will take on board our old wagon and our belongings. We will buy some mules in that town, then we will head west.

Just like that.

Ma's mouth dropped open, but no words came out. She was so mad I suspect the next funeral will be my pa's.”

We can't help but notice that every town has a “Pizza Hut” in it. Bob calls it the Church of Kansas.

“They all worship pizza,“ Bob tells us. “They have pizza for communion.”

As we drive along toward the Nebraska border we can't help but notice all the corn growing on either side of the road. This is for the cattle and I call it cattle corn: corn

just for cattle “Bob explains to us. All we can see is the corn stalks and the blue sky. What an absolutely beautiful sight. Oh beautiful for spacious skies!

Alma is the first town we come to in Nebraska. We visit the old stagecoach Pony Express Station.

Now it is on to Gothenburg and the sod house. The pioneer families living on the prairie could not chop down trees to built log cabins. There were no trees on the prairie so they built their small homes out of sod...a damp clay like material from the ground.

In North Platte we learn all about Buffalo Bill Cody as we walk through his house and barn. Buffalo Bill is known for his traveling “Wild West Shows” which featured grand parades, rodeo stunts and side shows as you would see in a circus. One side show stunt has a woman skimpily clad spread out on a revolving wooden circle disc and as the disco goes round and round a man throws sharp knives at the disc trying to miss stabbing the girl! We saw this all enacted out in a miniature wild west show using hand painted figures.

Tonight we are in Ogallala.

### **Friday October 7, 2005/ Ogallala, Nebraska**

#### **Gomorrah of the West: a fight over eating baked beans!**

This morning we wake up in Ogallala, Nebraska and it is only 30 degrees out. Brrrr! I only have a medium weight jacket for this trip and I am cold. As the day goes on the sun shines warmly and the air become warmer and warmer. By noontime my jacket is off and by 3:00 p.m. it is 85 degrees! From 30-85 degrees in one day. How is that possible?

Ogallala is sometimes referred to being the “Gomorrah of the West”! This is due to the violent fights that have broken out among men. One such fight was started because one man teased another for eating baked beans. The fights lead to deaths and burial in the nearby Boot Hill Cemetery.

As we drive through Nebraska our first stop is at Windless Hill. It should be known as “Breathless Hill” as far as I am concerned because the paved path leads straight up the steep hills. At the start of the path a sign gives a warning to stay on the beaten path and watch out for rattlesnakes!

Rattlesnakes were a common sight for our pioneer ancestors on their wagon treks. Hattie Campfield writes in her diary, “We see rattlesnakes hanging from trees and coiled in the sun. We just have to get used to them and watch out for them.”

Windless hill is a place where the pioneer wagon trains had to go down on their long trek to California and Oregon. It is hard to imagine how this was accomplished. One thing they did was to lower the wagons down by using ropes.

The scenery of the Nebraska hills from the top looking down on the plains is breathtaking. It is worth the struggle to climb up. It makes you pause and think of the hardships involved for these pioneer families moving west by covered wagons.

Now we are driving along Route 26 towards Chimney Rock when I see a little animal face pop up out of a hole in the ground. Then we all see many of these little cute critters which are known as prairie dogs! They are all popping out of their dug holes at the same time! It is quite a sight.

Chimney Rock is a tall prominent stone out cropping in the middle of the Nebraska plains. It can be seen from miles around and it was a landmark for the pioneer wagon train families along the Oregon Trail. These families always looked forward to getting as far as Chimney Rock even though it meant they were only 1/3 of their way to journey's end.

Here is how Hattie Campbell describes Chimney Rock when she sees it while traveling by wagon on the Oregon Trail.

“For two long days we approached Chimney Rock...it seemed to take forever. Two evenings we watched the sun set behind it as we ate supper.

Now that we are here it's a curious sight, a huge pile of rocks with what looks like a stone chimney rising up from its center. Jake and several boys hiked around its base and counted ten thousand steps. I don't know how they kept track of so many numbers but they did. Tall Joe says some other folks counted years past and they also said ten thousand.”

We also take a walk in the nearby cemetery where some of the pioneer family members are buried. The pioneer wagon journey was fraught with perils and although everyone was afraid of attacks from Indians, it was not this that killed them. It was disease such as cholera and swamp fever. It was accidents along the path. It was freezing to death or starving to death. So many families had to bury family members along the way and it was heartbreaking for them. Some turned back because of this.

As we ride along the highway I again turn to “The Oregon Trail Diary of Hattie Campbell.” Reading the diary aloud makes us feel we are making the pioneer journey ourselves.

I quote, “An emigrant train that left Independence, Missouri last spring got trapped in a blizzard high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near California. Forty some people froze or starved to death. To stay alive folks ate their livestock, their pets and then-this is the worst part-they ate parts of their dead friends! These were the Reed and Donner families and some were rescued just this February (1847). A whole winter in the mountains without food or shelter or warm clothes-how they must have suffered!

Word is that they took the Hastings Cutoff but something went wrong somehow. Ma is worried because the written guide we are following is also Hastings'. What if his maps are wrong for us too? She is by the fire with Pa, pleading for him to turn back.

I must be brave for Bennie and Jake, and I must be brave for Ma. But what if something happens to us and we can't get over the mountains in time?”

We visit the information center here and I find the man selling things in the gift shop reading the Episcopalian “Forward Day By Day” devotional. I ask him if he is Episcopal and he looks at me surprised by my question and replies yes. Then I tell him that Al and I are also Episcopal and he beams at us.

“Really?” he asks. “You are Episcopal? There are so few of us! Our bishop lives in Omaha and when we don't have a priest on Sundays we take turns giving the sermon”! He shakes my hand heartily.

Our next stop is “Scott's Bluff”. This is a huge rocky area in the plains that also serves as a landmark for the pioneers on their wagon trek to Oregon. We are able to take the winding road that leads through short tunnels to the top of the Bluff over 4000 feet above the plains floor. We get out of the car and take the short walks which enable us to

look down at the valley and towns below. It is impossible to describe the feeling and beauty of this place. We are on top of the world, it seems.

Writing in her diary, Hattie Campbell tells us about Scott's Bluff: "The bluff hugs the river so close we had to steer the wagons aside and pull around it, up a rocky ridge. Tall Joe said this place was named after the fur trader Hiram Scott who got sick and was abandoned by his companions. He crawled 60 miles trying to find them. When the trappers came this way again, they found his skeleton and what was left of his boots right here."

We drive back down and then to an area where we can actually see the deep ruts made from the wagons as they lumbered along the path. It is exciting to see their paths cut in the plains floor!

A short distance away is Register Rock which is where many pioneer men and women carved their names and dates as they journeyed on.

It feels absolutely wonderful to be out walking in the warm air today as we visit these historical places. Everywhere we look is beautiful with plains, hills and trees. How blessed we are to be able to see and experience all this. How blessed we are to journey in our minds with our pioneer ancestors and try to appreciate what they went through to journey and start new lives in a place of space and open air. Every task was physical and required much labor. Now a mere 150 years later we live in a technical world of push buttons. It is hard to fathom the changes since pioneer days.

There are many diaries that have been written by people making the journey overland in wagon trains. When we read these diaries we learn first hand what the typical days were like.

It is now 5:00 p.m. and we drive unceremoniously into Wyoming! It feels like I am making my own pioneer journey but in a far different way.

All of a sudden the Rocky Mountains come into view and we are silenced by the presence of these awesome peaked mountain ranges in the distance.

"O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works Thy Hand hast made." I feel so humbled in the presence of God.

We are spending the night in the Best Western Hotel in Douglas, Wyoming.

### **Saturday October 8, 2005/Douglas, Wyoming**

#### **"Sheriff Benton Is An Idiot!"**

This morning we telephone mom in Tom's River, NJ. We tell her we are staying at the Best Western Hotel and she gets excited thinking we are at the Best Western we usually stay in when we visit her.

"Great," she says. "You came to visit me?"

"No," answers Al. "We are in Wyoming!"

"Wyoming!" exclaims mother. She has forgotten we are on our trip.

"How is the traffic?" she asks.

"Terrific", Al replies. "We have no traffic." This is true. Our van is almost the only car we see on the roads we are traveling in the West!



You can tell we are in the land of wild animals and big game hunters. Our hotel room has an information paper which is an advertisement for the Douglas Meat Processing Company in Douglas, Wyoming.

Hunters will bring in their deer or whatever to the processing company so the animal can be cut up and prepared for the hunter's freezer. Hunters want to know what it will cost them to have their animal cut up into serving pieces so here is the price info.

Processing antelope and deer cost the hunter \$55.95. Elk and moose cost him \$.45/ lb.

You can also get European & full, head only, horns only, skin only and teeth additional at various prices. You might want specialty cuts of jalepeno cheese salami, beef jerky, pepper sticks, salami, pepperoni, summer sausage, polish sausage, or breakfast sausage.

Cattle are plentiful in the West and it is the main focus of all the restaurant meals here. Al and I eat a variety of protein, not just beef.

Off we go on another day of adventure and what a day it is. Our first stop is the natural bridge which is nearby. This is a handsome gray stone bridge within a park. Al and Bob and Earlene climb up the hill and walk over the bridge waving down at me from above so I can take their pictures. The bridge is among hills made of colorful red sandstone and white limestone.

We proceed to Casper, Wyoming arriving there at 9:00 a.m. and 1 mile above sea level.

As we are driving down the main road in Casper we look up at the hill above us and are taken by surprise by the words that have been boldly painted into the face of the hill.. In large letters a sign has been painted which reads.

“Sheriff Benton Is An Idiot”. We get a good laugh at this. But I'll bet you anything Sheriff Benton will think this is not funny!

Fly fishing in fast moving streams and brooks is a must do in Wyoming. We pause by the North Platte River where 9 fishermen are casting for trout. It is a very peaceful scene. We see one fisherman pull in a big trout, bag him into a net and then set him free!

We are leaving the level plains now and beginning to climb in altitude as the hills around us grown larger and shaggier and more colorful.

Look over there! It is a huge rock called Independence Rock! It is a significant land mark for those on the Oregon Trail and they pause there and write their names and dates on the rock.

Very high winds whip all around us and it takes all we can do to just walk over to the rock and look for the signatures of these pioneer families. Bob climbs straight up the face of the rock and later tells me the wind nearly pushed him over! Earlene and Al walk around to the back side and climb the rock to the top.

Boys and girls in Hattie Campbell's wagon train also climbed all over the rock. Hattie writes, “From a distance this sloped rock looks like a bear sleeping on its side. Up close, it's huge and easy to climb. Folks have been going up to the top to see the view and carve their names. Some boys raced each other up, then fired pistols in the air to celebrate. Jake asked Pa if he could have a few sticks of dynamite to throw off the top, just to see what would happen.

Pa thought for a moment. When he said yes, Jake let out a happy yell.

Pepper and I were at the river when we heard the explosion. We turned in time to see a puff of smoke floating down from the top. Some cattle took off running in flight, but were rounded up quick by men on horseback.

I don't understand why boys like such things or why Pa thinks dynamite is safer than rifles."

Do you see what I see up ahead on our journey down the road? Those jagged mountains off in the distance...something white is covering them...it is snow! We can see the snow covered Rocky Mountains and they are beautiful!

Next we stop at "Devil's Gate" which is a big cleft in the pass on the Oregon Trail.

We leave the North Platte River behind and cross over the Sweetwater River. We also say good bye to the Oregon Trail as we head in a different direction. We will miss them and seeing their wagon tracks winding over the plains.

I will let Hattie Campbell tell you in her diary the story behind the naming of the river.

"About the Sweetwater River. Tall Joe says it got its name from some trappers who tried to get their mules across during a storm. One of the packs was full of sugar and when its saddle broke, it went 300 lbs. of sugar."

We are now passing hills naturally painted in pink and white. They are beautiful jagged rocks lining Route 26.

We are now at the base of the Rocky Mountains and we begin the climb up and up through the woods. It is 5:45 p.m. and darkness is falling. Snow is beginning to fall mixed with rain. It is the first snow that we see this season! We have many miles to go to the next town of Jackson and I become very nervous thinking about what might happen on the lonely mountain road as a dark cloud hangs overhead and snow falls. The road is narrow and snakes up and up, higher and higher among the beautiful tall pine trees. I pray for our safety and try to relax. No one has to tell me about the dangers of being in a Rocky Mountain blizzard especially on a cold night where the grizzly bears roam!

We climb to 7000, 8000, 9000 feet and finally to 9658 feet! We have passed the Continental Divide! God hears my prayers and the snow never increases in strength. In addition it never gets completely dark! We drive on and on arriving in Jackson, Wyoming around 8:00 p.m. and it is only then that it grows very dark!

We find a motel and have a good dinner nearby. Inside a sign on the wall reads, "Eat here and get gas." We just laugh and say we don't care. We just want a good hot dinner.

It feels wonderful to be in our warm motel room snug and warm for the night.

### **Sunday October 9, 2005/ Jackson, Wyoming**

**No words...**

This morning I make the mistake of listening to the weather report for today. The report plunges me into great disappointment: snow and rain this morning and rain this afternoon. How are ever going to see the Great Teton mountain ranges? Have we come all this way to be unable to see the mountains?

Al and I drive to the 8:00 a.m. worship service at St. Johns Episcopal Church in Jackson. We sit in the cozy dark wood chapel and feel right at home among fellow worshippers. Everyone is very friendly to us and we enjoy chatting with members after the service. It feels just right to concentrate on God and thank Him for the majesty of His creation and the love He pours out on us!

After church we get into the van with Bob and Earlene and we are off to see Grand Teton National Park. At first the tops of the mountains are covered with clouds and mist but at least it is not raining or snowing. As we proceed through the park conditions get better and better. The sun comes shining through and the skies turn deep blue as the majestic Grand Tetons shine in all their glory.

There are no words. There are just no words to describe the beauty of Grand Teton National Park. I am a writer and I have no words. This does not happen very often but it happens today.

Standing in the midst of the Grand Teton snow covered Rocky Mountains with the sun lighting up the peaks is a spiritual experience that can not be described. It is like standing in the presence of God...speechless. He speaks to us in His majestic creation and you can hear Him in the wind through the pines. He says, "Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am. Be still and know that I.... Be still and know that.. Be still and know. Be still and ...be still...Be...."

We spend the day driving to many many lookout points and taking pictures of scenes that are impossible to reproduce: the craggy peaks, the blue lakes, rushing streams, wide meadows, tall green pines splashed with bright yellow aspen leaves and yes, wild animals roaming free.

Our first stop is "Transfiguration Episcopal Chapel". This is a small dark wood summer chapel, now closed for worship services but open for visitors. Behind the small altar is a clear glass bay window through which is displayed the snow peaked mountains. The chapel is filled with peace and serenity and wonder.

Other places we drive to in the park are Jenny Lake, Cottonwood Creek, the summit of Signal Mountain at 7,800 ft. for the wide view of the valley below, Jackson Lake and Snake River. All these places are overshadowed by the mountain ranges in the background.

On top of Signal Mountain we meet a man named Ely.

"I left from Santa Barbara, California and I'm driving across the country in my white BMW," he tells us all smiles. "It took me 3 days to get here!"

This is a million dollar view and it's all free. It's all free"! He looks so happy. "I'm going 130 mph in my BMW and it's great, I love it!"

We just hope he slows down on the winding road from Signal Mountain. We figure he'll be in Boston sometime tomorrow!

Wildlife is abundant in the Park and we have seen a herd of elk lead by the male with an unbelievable rack of antlers on his head. We have seen exotic birds, swans, ducks, geese, beaver and an otter. At night we hear the coyotes howling on the open range right in front of our motel.

Each day is an adventure. Earlene and I are tired in the mornings. It is hard for us to sleep at night with the excitement inside us of the promise of more unknown adventures each day. We have planned nothing and we are shown everything. Lead on O King Eternal, lead on!

## Monday October 10, 2005/ Yellowstone National Park

### **Where the elk and the buffalo roam...**

Today the sun shines strongly all day and we are off to Yellowstone National Park. We leave the main road to take a side road and as we are driving a long I see these big brown rocks up ahead on the road. As we get closer we come across a whole herd of buffalo grazing on the grass pasture and the rocks in the road are buffalo! We count over 100 buffalo and they are right up next to the road. We come very close to them and take pictures and they barely notice we are there! This is thrilling to us. It is unusual to be able to see wildlife so close up.

We decide to climb Shadow Mountain in our Dodge Caravan and we start the long ride up. The road gets narrow very quickly and we are on a dirt road. The road turns to mud and the going is more difficult. Up and up to over 8500 feet! We slide a little in the mud, and snow and ice are beginning to form on the roads. The driving is stressful as we climb and climb snaking our way up. We come to the outside edge of the mountain and there is no guard rail. I can't look off the edge so I look away and cling to the grab handle of the car door next to me, praying for protection and safety! I am scared!

At the top of Shadow Mountain Bob stops the car. Should we go forward and on down or try and turn around and go back down the way we came up? Which way would be safest? We decide to go straight ahead and down the other side of the mountain. We inch our way down until we finally reach the level land and the paved road. We let out a big sigh of relief. We are safely down. Thank You, God!

I look out over the flat grassland in time to see a strange looking dog like animal coming across. "It's a **coyote**," announces Bob. "We see them all the time on our farm in Maine."

We arrive at the gate to **Yellowstone National Park** at 11:30 a.m. For the next 2 hours we wind through the park turning into the look-out areas to see **Lewis Gorge, Lewis Falls, Yellowstone Lake, Cascade Falls** and finally **Old Faithful!**

Yellowstone Park is beautiful filled with tall pine trees and canyons through which water rushes and gushes. There are plenty of water falls to see and I could spend all day looking at these.

But here we are now at Old Faithful! Everyone has read about Old Faithful being a huge geyser that erupts in regular intervals through the day. We are told the next eruption will be about 2:03 p.m. and so we gather and sit with the other spectators in the sun under the deep blue sky. The white steam is billowing out of the hole and suddenly we can see squirts of water forming. Now the water is spilling out and up in a strong rush and roar. Higher and higher it goes in a great column of white billowing steam. It is so awesome that everyone watches in awed silence. It is truly an incredible sight. After the eruption we walk in a big circle through many smaller geysers and hot springs all smoking and billowing. It is an amazing sight. I am so thankful I have been able to come here and see this.

We leave Old Faithful and proceed through the Park. Why are all these cars ahead of us parked along side the road? What are the people looking at? It turns out to be a herd of elk! The male elk is easy to see with its majestic rack!

We have crossed the border into Montana to find a good place to spend the night! We are now in West Yellowstone at “Kelly’s Inn”. We have eaten at the Bullwinkle Restaurant and now I am ready for bed. Al is already snoring!

## **Tuesday October 11, 2005 / Yellowstone National Park**

### **Buffalo Scare**

This morning after breakfast we go on a Moose Hunt. We are told that moose come down to drink at Hebgen Lake in Montana, so off we go for a drive around the lake looking for moose. We don’t see any Moose but we do see some beautiful views of the mountains as the morning fog blows through. We never tire of seeing new places. In the 2 hour loop around the lake we drive from Montana to Idaho to Montana and then back to Wyoming where we started in West Yellowstone, crossing the Continental Divide 2 times!

As we are driving by a mountain Bob comments, “There’s a road leading to the top of the mountain and we could go there.”

“No!” shout Earlene and I at the same time. “We don’t want another Shadow Mountain trip.”

Today we take the upper Yellowstone Park road for our day of sightseeing in the Park. We stop at Gibbons Falls, Artists Paintpots and Mammoth Hot Springs. Here we walk around and look at the fascinating gurgling hot springs.

We also stop and climb a hill to look at a fenced in petrified tree. It is uninteresting looking and we stand gazing at the petrified tree in silence, not wanting to admit we are unimpressed. Finally Earlene breaks the silence by commenting, “Well, I see some grass growing out of the tree half way up.”

It is at Mammoth Hot Springs that a young Chinese couple walks past a barn to read the information board. What they don’t see is the single buffalo grazing right next to the side of the barn! When they turn to walk back the couple sees the buffalo standing a few feet away. The woman gives a yell and runs away to the parking lot while her partner takes a picture of the buffalo. It is a buffalo scare.

Signs in the park often remind tourists to keep away from the wild animals because they can charge and kill.

Today we drive through beautiful canyons and admire the sweeping mountain views. Best of all we love all the wildlife we see.

Right next door to the tourist Visitor’s Center in Mammoth Springs grazes a whole herd of elk! The male is most impressive and regal looking with his large rack of antlers. We keep our distance!

We also see herds and herds of buffalo grazing along the roads and at one bend in the road we have to come to a complete stop because the buffalo are crossing the road!

We also see cows, horses, a wolf coming across the field and mountain goats sunning on a ledge of the canyon.

No moose yet but maybe tomorrow. We also look for bear.

## Wednesday October 12, 2005 / Yellowstone National Park

### **Moose Alert!**

Today starts out gray and dark looking. Rain showers are expected. Before we set out on our 3<sup>rd</sup> day in Yellowstone Park, we stop for gas. Al chats with the service person and comes back beaming and all excited.

“Someone called in from the school and reported seeing a bull moose roaming in the area of the school!”, Al says. “Let’s drive around and look for the moose.” So we drove up and down the road behind the school, but we did not see a moose. Disappointed we stopped at the admissions gate to the Park and asked about the “Moose Alert”.

“Oh yes,” we are told. “A moose has been reported in the area.” Without expecting to see a moose we drove on ahead into the Park. We did not get far when Bob calls out, “There it is! I see the moose.”

Sure enough we all saw the bull moose walking through the field to our right and I was able to take a good picture of it. Yesterday we drove all around the lake looking for a moose and did not find one. This morning we are not actually looking for one and a moose practically walks right in front of us. How can you figure it?

“The only wild animal we have not seen on the posted list is a grizzly bear,” I comment.

“We will probably not see one,” Earlene tells us. “I am told the bears have just gone into hibernating and they will not come out until spring. The metabolism of bears change in winter and some female bears have babies during hibernation and do not even know it until they wake up!”

Today as we drive through the Park we see so many wild animals. It is like Wild Animal Kingdom right in front of us all day. Wild animals roam freely in the Park and it is illegal to harm them in any way. Not once, but twice we have to stop our car because a whole herd of buffalo is walking down the middle of the road right past our car! They are solid massive creatures and don’t seem to care if people are around them or not.

Another time Al pulls into a parking spot and right in front of us is a herd of elk feeding on the grass.

Today we also see antelope, cows and horses.

Our last day in the Park we zero in on the canyons and waterfalls which are spectacular. “The Grand Canyon Of The Yellowstone” say the signs, and indeed we are reminded of the Grand Canyon when we stand overlooking the deep canyons and long cascading water falls. The walls of the canyons are “painted” in colors of yellow and orange. There are several areas to view the canyons, and each one offers a hike to the view. We are getting lots of exercise on our daily walks to the look outs.

We are reluctant to leave Yellowstone Park in the middle of the afternoon of our 3<sup>rd</sup> day. The rest of the sights on our trip will probably not begin to compare with what we have seen in these National Parks we are thinking.

Not far from outside Yellowstone Park we come to a sign reading, “Wayfarer’s Chapel Worship Services Sundays 10:00 a.m. mid June-August sponsored by Christ Episcopal Church.” The arrow points up into the woods.

“That’s strange,” we say, “I don’t see any chapel.” We are in need of a stretch and exercise so we follow the arrow and walk the path into the woods. Soon we come upon an outside chapel! The stone altar is there with a dark wood cross behind it. Long horseshoe shaped stone benches face the altar.

Silence falls on us as we face the altar.

“Someone should give a sermon,” Al says.

“Not me,” Earlene says quickly.

“Earlene,” I say, “Say something about our trip.”

We all laugh and Earlene says, “Thank God we took this trip!”

It is the perfect sermon: simple and to the point. I believe God likes this “sermon” too because the most incredible thing happens. As we get back in our van and drive down the road, the sun suddenly comes shining down on us. The dark sky disappears and a sky of brilliant blue appears light up the landscape with the most incredible colors. We are mesmerized again by God’s paint brush of colors and we stop several times along the road to take pictures of colorful scenes that will be impossible to duplicate.

We drive through Buffalo Bill State Park and admire the reservoir with the snow peaked mountains in the backgrounds. Driving through a series of short tunnels we proceed on through Shoshone Nat. Park stopping to gape at the impressive rock formations.

Driving through Cody, Wyoming we continue down the road to the next town about 60 miles away! This is Greybull, Wyoming, a small cowboy town. We like the uniqueness of this little town and the friendly people we talk to.

### **Thursday October 13, 2005/ Greybull. Wyoming**

#### **“I’ll have 2 pancakes and a cinnamon bun, please.”**

This morning we drive 15 miles out of town for breakfast at “Dirty Annie’s” in Shell, Wyoming. This restaurant is highly recommended by two people in town and we look forward to eating in a local eatery where we can meet some townspeople. The sign outside of town reads, “Shell, Wyoming Population 50.” Yes, that’s right, 50. You think **that’s** bad? The sign for the town before Greybull read, “Population 10.” No joke. The towns in the Great Plains area are very small and far between. It is usually 50-60 miles between these small towns with open ranch land in between. This is the land of ranching and cattle and cowboys. They call them ranchers.

Bob and Earlene, Al and I walk into “Dirty Annie’s” and cause quite a stir. The restaurant is filled with ranchers with their cowboy hats, kerchiefs, jeans, wide brass belt buckles and chaps. The horse trucks are parked outside.

They all look up surprised to see “outsiders”. In a town of 50 everyone knows everyone and we are not everyone.

“Are you folks staying in town or are you passing through?” And so the conversation begins. One rancher in particular was very friendly and chatted easily with us. He lived in the area all his life and he loved the wide open spaces. His wife was from San Francisco and the times they visited her folks in California, she drove. He was horrified at the traffic on the freeway!

Out west it is so different. Very few cars or trucks are on the road!  
We all look at the menu and Al says, "I'll have 2 pancakes and a cinnamon bun."  
Our waitress looks shocked and replies, "No, I don't think you will want 2  
pancakes. We make big pancakes. I suggest you order just one to start with."

"OK," answers Al agreeably. "I'll order one pancake and a cinnamon bun."

The rest of us order the cream of wheat cereal and a cinnamon bun.

When Al is in the men's room the waitress brings his pancake and cinnamon bun to the table. Now it is our turn to look shocked. The pancake is served on a medium sized pizza pan and it is the size of a thick medium pizza!!! It fills the whole pan. The cinnamon bun is also extra large. When Al comes back to the table he is very surprised.

"Wow. This is not how they make 'em at home."

Al eats the pancake and saves the bun until later. He is so full that that is all he eats all day. The pancake sets him up for the day and it is not until 4:00 p.m. that he even thinks of eating his cinnamon bun.

The rest of the day we drive across the state of Wyoming and into South Dakota at 6:00 p.m. Bob and Al switch at the driving in the middle of the day and we make a stop for gas and a walk in the town Sheridan. We need to stretch and exercise.

The scenery is the same all day: the flat plains dotted with tiny towns now and then. The town of "Spotted Horse" is so small it just has a small general store with a large spotted horse carved out of wood standing in front of it. The town of "Wild Cat" was not much bigger.

Along the way we see flocks of sheep now and then and of course herds of horses and cows-mostly black Angus cows. We also see herds and herds of deer grazing in the fields as the sun starts to set. None of us has seen so many deer before.

Once in the afternoon a large buck runs right across the highway in front of us. Fortunately we see the buck coming ahead and are able to slow the car to avoid an accident.

Mid afternoon we visit "Devil's Tower." Beside the road leading to the tower we come across a field filled with prairie dogs popping up and down from their holes in the ground! Prairie dogs are little animals I think are so cute, but the farmers around here hate them. They dig up the fields leaving large holes that can cause accidents to farm animals and humans that do not see the holes. I am reading O Pioneers by Willa Cather and in it she talks about a horse stepping into a prairie dog hole and breaking its leg.

Devil's Tower is a massive stone out cropping standing almost 900 feet from the ground. The Plains Indians have revered this tower and have hung kerchiefs and cloths on tree branches beneath the tower representing the sacredness of the place.

The tower is very imposing and impressive and we are able to walk along a long path of stone boulders at the base. We come to a place where we overlook the wide valley below. The scene is breathtaking but we don't have time to stay long. I make known my wish to sit for an hour before a canyon view before our trip is over. I want to soak in the holiness of the scene and take the time to soak it in. This will be my greatest souvenir of our trip. I want to internalize the moment and take it home with me to bring it out at will.

Tonight we are staying for the night in Spearfish, South Dakota.



## Friday October 14, 2005/Spearfish, South Dakota

### **Where's Bob?!**

This morning we get in our van and take the Spearfish Canyon Drive through the Black Hills. The pine trees are such a dark green color that it looks like black hills from a distance.

As we drive through a town named Lead (Leed), Al shouts out, "Hey! There is a Curves place. Do you girls want to do in?"

Earlene and I laugh. We have been keeping an eye out for "Curves" and now here is the first one we've seen on our trip. But the truth is, we have been doing so much walking and hiking each day at points of interest that we do not feel the desire to take time to visit Curves for Women. We just want to keep on the road visiting the beautiful scenic areas we come to.

On the Canyon Drive we come to a scenic turn-off and the path points the way to a waterfall. I get out of the car and feel cold. So I search for my warm jacket I bought in Jackson, Wyoming and I can not find it. I tell everyone and we make plans to return to the hotel to look for it. In the meantime I put my suitcase on the picnic table and search my suitcase for the missing jacket. It is not there. Finally Al finds it on the floor of the van. The jacket is so dark you can't see it on the floor!

The waterfall was just a trickle of water coming down so we didn't take a picture. We have seen so many waterfalls by now that we are getting choosy.

We drive on to Deadwood, South Dakota which is a real cowboy town. Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane both have their roots here where their lives ended abruptly.

The town of Deadwood grew up during the Gold Rush days: the days of saloons, nights of whiskey and ladies of the evening, and pistol fights.

First we visit Mount Moriah Cemetery also known as Boot Hill Cemetery where Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane are buried. It is a lovely cemetery. Wild Bill was shot in the head while in a downtown saloon and Calamity Jane died of extreme alcoholism.

Al tells us, "They call it Boot Hill Cemetery because the ground was so hard and rocky they couldn't dig normal types of graves. So they drilled holes in the rocks and buried the bodies head first. All that stuck up were their boots. Riiiiight! What an imagination my guy has.

We all visit the Visitor's Center and watch the video explaining the history of the town of Deadwood. It is kind of scary. Lots of violence. Cowboy stuff.

Al and I and Bob and Earlene walk slowly down Main Street past many saloons and casinos. We take pictures of this interesting town until Earlene says,

"Where's Bob?!" He has simply disappeared. Just like that. We have no idea where he is. It is unlike him to disappear like this and Earlene is very worried. We search in all the saloons especially the one where Wild Bill Hickok was murdered. I am thinking 'Do you suppose Bob has met up with foul play?' Has he been kidnapped or shot? Our Bob? Earlene hears a siren and thinks the worst. Bob has collapsed and been taken to the hospital. She is suddenly a widow.

We look into "Mustard Sally's" where Bob said he would have lunch. No Bob.

We walk back to the car and at noon just as our parking meter runs out, Bob walks up to our van nonchalantly.

“Where were you?!” says Earlene.

“I was downstairs in the saloon where Wild Bill was murdered looking at the museum display. I told you I would be there.”

In the afternoon we drive through Custer State Park. This Park is a must for any tourists passing by. We drive on the “Wildlife Trail” and then the “Needle’s Eye Highway.” Wildlife trail takes us through the prairie fields where the prairie dogs pop up out of their holes, where the coyote scouts for food (prairie dogs), and where the buffalo, deer and antelope roam! We see them all. Especially the buffalo. Once again they roam the fields and road preventing any cars from passing them. The outdoors is sunny, warm and silent. God is all around. I just want to pull up a chair and spend the whole day there in the great outdoors and see all the animals. I want to walk the trails and talk to God.

The Needle’s Eye Highway takes us through the pine forest on winding hairpin curves of the road. Up and up we climb in altitude. We pass the finger rocks named for the rock formation and we finally come the narrow one way tunnel that leads us out to Needle’s Eye. This is a rock formation that looks like a needle’s eye. These rock formations overlooking a wide valley with mountains in the background seduce us into climbing all over the rocks to get the best view. Finally we drive on satisfied.

Our last stop is Breezy Hill where offers a fantastic panoramic view of the valley and mountains. It is almost dark and we promise we will return early tomorrow morning at sunrise to see the view in all its morning glory.

On our way out of the Park we see George Washington on top of a mountain! We are suddenly at Mount Rushmore and from the direction we are going we only see the face of George Washington carved into the rock. He is unmistakable. His face is lit up. Is it the moon? No, it is a light shining on Mount Rushmore and now we see all 4 faces lit up in the dark. Very impressive. We will return in the morning.

### **Saturday October 15, 2005/ Keystone, South Dakota**

#### **How Great Thou Art**

Today we spend visiting Mt. Rushmore, Custer State Park and The Badlands National Park.

But first we drive back to Breezy Point where we walk to the top of the hill to see the view at the break of day. I have been asked to be given 30min. of meditation time at one of our mountain overlooks and this is it.

Al, Bob and Earlene go off on a walk while I stay on the mountain top and talk to God. This is not hard at all. He is everywhere all about me and in me.

Looking over the Black Hills mountain ranges, I open the pages of my Book of Common Prayer and read aloud to God Morning Prayer. I have done this so many times at home, but out here on the mountain top by myself, I feel that God hears me in a special way. I pray the familiar prayers with feeling and sincerity. I feel so small in His vast creation. I understand anew that as wonderful as His creation is, it is He that is the Creator. I must not worship the created things no matter how beautiful they are. They only point to Him, the Creator.

There is only one hymn that sums up my experience of meditation and worship on the mountain top, and so I sing it to God with courage and conviction:

“O Lord My God, when I in awesome wonder,  
Consider all the works Thy hands have made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy Power throughout the universe displayed.  
Then sings my soul, My Savior God to Thee,  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art,  
Then sings my soul, My Savior God to Thee,  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!”

Driving on in the bend of the road we come to a white mountain goat. He acts nonplussed to see us and just goes walking by. You never know what you will meet in the bend of the road and so you have to drive very carefully in these Parks.

Mt. Rushmore is very impressive. There they all are: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln all carved out of stone in near perfect likenesses. It is a very great tribute to these leaders of our country. I thank God for the founding of this country. Inside myself I hurt when I think how our American Government has slaughtered the American Indians and destroyed their livelihood and way of life, but I thank God for who He is and trust that He is working out His good purposes in our country.

I quote from the book TALES OF THE BLACK HILLS, “Many visitors comment it is not just the colossal size that makes Mount Rushmore unforgettable, it’s the life-like representations of the four Presidents and the emotions they evoke.

One young woman summed it up: ‘I love to gaze at our great Presidents. It makes me feel so patriotic and proud of our country. I feel as if I am communing with the soul of America.’”

We take the Iron Mountain Road through the Black Hills and once again enter Custer State Park. The morning sun cuts through the pines and lights up the forest in bright yellows and green. Then we enter the Plains area and rounding a bend in the road we come upon a herd of wild donkeys!! They are right smack in the middle of the road and they are used to being fed crackers and such by the tourists. Therefore they boldly walk up to our car and stick their heads into the open windows looking for food! Here is this huge donkey head suddenly in my lap and I pet the large nose tentatively. Al gives it a Triscuit and we slowly drive on.

Two motor cyclists are now approaching the wild donkeys and Bob says, “Uh Ooo, the cyclists are in for a big surprise!”

All afternoon we drive through The Badlands National Park in S. Dakota. The Indians called them the “badlands” because the huge canyons and rocky pinnacles were obstacles to them as they traveled through the area on horseback. It was bad traveling terrain.

But the loop through the Badlands is full of scenic overlooks and hiking trails through the rocks. We enjoy all our stops and hikes. In one area there are so many prairie dogs that it is named “Prairie Dog City”.

Tonight we are in the town of Wall and we visit the famous Wall Drug store which is a block long. After dinner at the “Cactus Café” on Main St. we are now ready for bed!

### **Sunday October 16, 2005/ Wall, South Dakota**

#### **“This whole thing strikes me as being very corny.”**

This morning we go back to the famous Wall Drug Store for breakfast. The Wall Drug store was founded in 1931 by Ted and Dorothy Hustead when they were newly married. Ted was a pharmacist and Dorothy was a teacher who gave up her teaching career to be a business partner with Ted in their new venture. They talked about their plans to open a drug store in Wall with God, and God seemed to say “Go ahead. This is where I want you to be.”

At the time the town of Wall was practically “dead”. It was a poor prairie town and business was slow. Ted felt good about helping sick townspeople get better by filling their prescriptions, but it did not provide enough income for them to stay in business. Ted and Dorothy decided to give it 5 years, and then reevaluate their goals.

Nothing changed in 4 ½ years. As the 5<sup>th</sup> year was approaching something dramatic occurred. One hot dusty summer afternoon, Dorothy lay down for a nap. She couldn’t sleep due to the noise of the “jalopies” going by on the freeway. She began to think of what the people in the cars might need that would bring them down from the freeway and into the drug store for business. She thought they would be thirsty for ice water, and water and ice was something Wall Drug Store had plenty of! She talked her husband Ted into putting up large advertising signs leading up to the town of Wall with slogans urging the people to come to Wall Drug for free ice water. Ted thought Dorothy was “nuts” because he always gave ice water away free to customers, but Dorothy said they needed to see the ads and think about it.

The signs went up on the freeway and the people started coming down and coming in! The business just took off after that with more and more people coming in and making purchases in addition to the free ice water.

Today the store looks nothing like the first little store did. Today Wall Drug Store is a city block long and can better be described as a department store and mini mall! In addition they have a “Travelers Chapel” on the premises for those who want to use it for meditation of God and prayers. Business continues to be great and I can tell you for a fact that their free ice water tastes delicious. I had two glasses of it myself.

When we meet Earlene and Bob for breakfast, I can see that Earlene is eager to tell me something. From the looks on her face, this is going to be good.

“Bob wakes me up this morning and says to me, ‘Earlene, it’s 6:30.’” she says.

‘Oh, no! It’s time to get up already’ “I answer. So I get up and shower and put on my clothes. Then I look at my watch and see that it says 4:30 a.m.! So I say to Bob, ‘My watch says it is 4:30! And Bob says, ‘Oh. I forget that I haven’t corrected the time on my watch for the new time zones. Sorry.’

Earlene was unable to go back to sleep.

Today we speed along the interstate highway towards Kansas City as our vacation is drawing to a close. We stop in Mitchell, South Dakota to see the popular

“Corn Palace” on Main Street. I have never heard of the “Corn Palace”, but Earlene’s mother tells her she has to see it. So here we are at 1:30 p.m. in the town of Mitchell staring up at this huge building which is covered with ears of corn of various colors! Ears of corn! Who would believe it. The ears of corn are laid out in such a way as to make scenes of people in various poses. The first corn palace went up in 1892. In a brochure I read, “During its over 100 years of existence, it has become known worldwide and now attracts more than half a million visitors annually. The palace was conceived as a gathering place where city residents and their rural neighbors could enjoy a fall festival with extraordinary stage entertainment. This tradition continues today. The Palace is redecorated each year with naturally colored corn and other grains and native grasses. 13 different colors and shades are used to decorate the Corn Palace: red, brown, black, blue, white, orange, calico, yellow and green. A different theme is chosen each year and murals are designed to reflect that theme. Ear by ear the corn is nailed to the Corn Palace to create a scene. The decorating process starts each year in May. The corn murals are stripped at the end of August and the new ones are completed by the first of October.”

Inside the Corn Palace is a huge auditorium/gym that is used for all kinds of community events including high school graduations and basket ball games. The walls of the auditorium are decorated with pictures...made out of ears of corn, of course. We walk through the Palace looking at the unique murals made out of corn, and at the end Al says to me, “This whole thing strikes me as being very corny!”

It is said that birds love to come and peck at the corn on the outside of the Palace and that the Corn Palace is the world’s largest bird feeder!

We are glad we have stopped in Mitchell to see this very unusual place. Mitchell is in the heart of corn growing farmland.

We are driving through the prairie land which is flatland. The interstate highway is straight. Al and Bob take two hour shifts of driving to break up the monotony of the straight driving, no change in scenery and little traffic. A bend in the road is rare taking place every hour or so, and thus coming to a bend in the road is a major event of the journey.

“Hey, Al, we’re coming to a bend in the road,” we joke.

Silence.

“Al! We’re coming to a bend.” (Is he asleep? Not hearing?)

“I’m awake! I see it.”

“Oh, boy, here we go.”

“We’re passing a truck. This is double the fun.” The joking is endless and we laugh helplessly at ourselves in the situation.

There is a strong wind today on the prairie and by now we know that every day is a windy day on the prairie. Here there is nothing to stop the wind! No trees, no houses or buildings. The wind just sweeps across the Plains in power and strength. I feel like I have been wind blown for almost 2 weeks and I keep checking to see if my earrings are still clinging to my ears. I do not have pierced ears and miraculously my earrings are still in place.

We stop along the way at a town park to stretch and take a brisk walk. A walk in the park always feels so good.

Tonight we are staying in Onawa, Iowa. Our motel has a very noisy toilet. Al says it sounds like the lower waterfalls in Yellowstone National Park.

## Monday October 17, 2005/Onawa Iowa

### Where am I?

This morning I step out of our motel room to go the lobby for breakfast. I look around me at the unfamiliar scenery and wonder, where am I? A different motel room each night has taken its toll. I have to think where I am.

Today is rather sad and melancholy as this is our last day of vacation together. Something special is coming to an end. As wonderful as the beautiful sights are, as fun as our adventures have been, I think we will miss each other the most. When all is said and done, it is the people that matter the most. It has been 2 weeks of pure fun with no worries to speak of. What a gift. Each day has held unexpected wonders that we embraced each day as enthusiastically as children. Sometimes Earlene and I could not sleep at night, tossing and turning with excitement dreaming and thinking about the unknown adventures to come. We have seen and learned so much about ourselves and about our country and its history.

We drive through the backroads of Iowa farmland this morning thrilling to the simple pleasures of cattle in the fields, the land being plowed and harvested, the rows and rows of dried corn, clothes hanging in side yards in the warm morning air and rivers and streams sparkling blue under the big blue sky. Life is good. Very good.

We make a stop at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge. We take time to stand on the shore of the Missouri River and identify the geese, birds and ducks before us. Turkeys wander across the road and a white tailed deer leaps across as well.

The park is filled with warblers, gulls, shorebirds, cottontails, raccoons, coyotes, opossums and fox squirrels. We do not see all of the wildlife, but we know they are there and can see us! We do see two large turtles sunning on posts sticking up out of the water.

In 1967 a sunken steamship was discovered on the grounds. On display are the many interesting artifacts found in the excavation process.

We leave there and the road to Kansas City is long. We don't talk much. No one wants to say good-bye.

I am comforted to know we will continue to see our good friends Bob and Earlene. We will look at our pictures and remember our adventures and the things we learned years to come.

We have seen the spacious skies, amber waves of grain, purple headed majesties above the fruited plain.

We have "walked" the Oregon trail next to our pioneer ancestors and we have traced on maps the route taken by Lewis and Clark. We have learned anew how much we owe to the American Indians in their kindness to us. We have learned about our cruel treatment of them and the ache in our hearts that this brings

I can only end by agreeing with the words and sentiments of Katherine Lee Bates,

**"America! America! God shed His grace on thee,  
and crown thy good with brotherhood  
from sea to shining sea!"**