

Florida, 1992

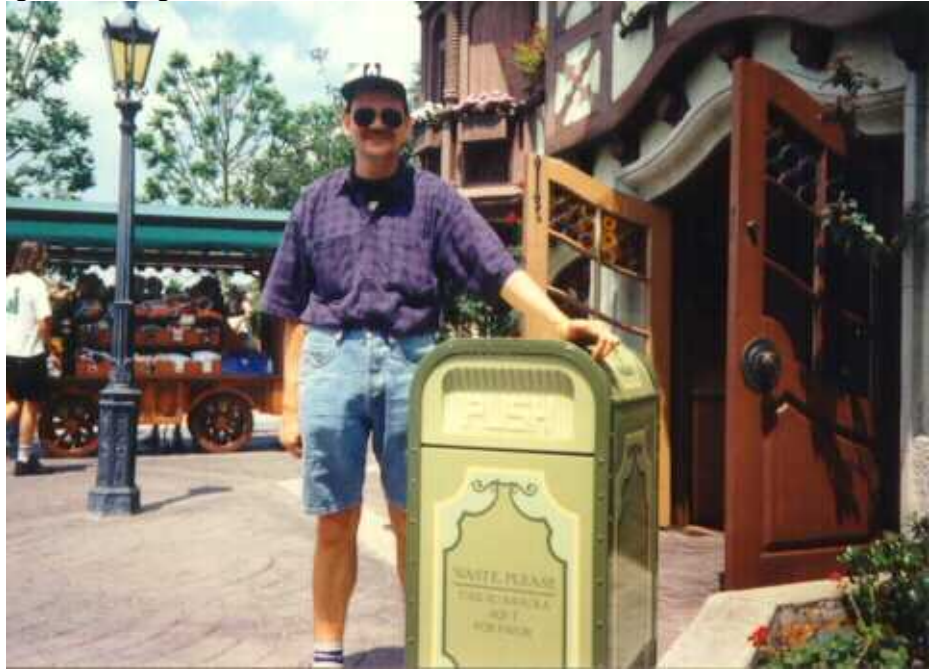
[UPDATE: July, 2008—As I gradually go back over my old travelogues, I'll be leaving the original text intact but adding additional comments in boldfaced enclosed in brackets to expand on what was originally said. I'll also add some additional scanned photos to enhance the original travelogues.

It's New Year's Day now, almost nine months since my vacation excursion for 1992. Looking back at the notes I scrawled for the trip though, this may be an appropriate time; it was dismal out then, as it is today.

SATURDAY, April 18, 1992

I left Algona early on a gloomy Saturday morning. We had a really wet spring in Iowa this year (quite a change from the years of drought in the '80s), and Easter was no exception. I made my way through heavy fog and drizzle to the Mason City airport, where my trip was set to begin. It was not exactly the nicest way to begin a vacation.

When I got to Mason City, I wasn't exactly surprised to find that there were delays and cancellations at the airport. Apparently there was no problem with flights taking off from Iowa, but nothing could land there in fog (when I came back from Florida, I found out why). The flight I was booked on was one of several flights a day that Northwest Airlinck runs between Mason City and the Twin cities. The same little plane basically shuttles back and forth all day long. **[I'd find out later that isn't actually true. Instead of a single plane shuttling back and forth—which would certainly work—they actually send the planes that originate in Fort Dodge/Mason City onward from Minneapolis to destinations in northern Minnesota and Ontario.]** Unfortunately it was in Minneapolis, and it wasn't going to make it to Iowa unless the fog lifted. The desk staff was quite friendly, but they weren't able to be terribly helpful. There was certainly no problem in getting me on another flight **[this was before the day when EVERYTHING was booked solid];** the problem was, it didn't seem very likely that **any** flights would be leaving Mason City today. I scrunched into the 1950s plastic lounge furniture and pondered my limited options as I graded papers and time passed. The only reasonable option appeared to be driving up to Minneapolis, spending a fortune on parking at the airport there (parking in Mason City is free), and trying to find some flight to Orlando to replace the one I was booked on. Eventually the announcement came that my flight was indeed cancelled.



Leaning on a trash can at Epcot Center – Walt Disney World



by Sandra Springstun's car at Daytona Beach

But the good news came then, too. Another man at the airport was in a bind worse than mine. He had to make a connection in Minneapolis for the one and only flight into Lima, Ohio, and he was determined to do it. He cashed in his ticket to Minneapolis, said he was driving up there himself, and offered to take along anyone else who wanted to go. I quickly agreed and cashed in my ticket. (I ended up being credited with about one-third of the round trip fare from Mason City to Orlando just for that one short hop from Mason

City to the Cities.) **[I'd love to know how they determine the breakdown, particularly since fares to the same destinations are often cheaper out of MCW than MSP—even though you have to connect in Minneapolis to reach the destination. No one in their right mind would FLY from Mason City to Minneapolis without continuing elsewhere.]** I threw my little gym bag beside his designer luggage in the trunk of his BMW and joined his wife and him for a ride to Minneapolis.

It turned out that the man was president of North Iowa Area Community College (which explains the lovely car and luggage). He was on an evaluation team for the North Central Association, evaluating a community college in Lima, Ohio. He had already postponed his arrival one day, and he absolutely had to be there today. Moreover, his plane to Ohio left the cities even earlier than my flight to Florida. From the back seat I got a clear view of the speedometer as we raced up I-35 in the left lane, and it was never below the speed limit the whole way. Most of the time we were doing at least 80 mph. It's normally a full two hours from Mason City to Bloomington (where the Twin Cities airport is), but we did it in less than an hour and a half.

When we got to the Cities, he parked in a loading zone, we got our luggage, and his wife took the wheel to race back to Mason City (where she was in charge of an art exhibition in the afternoon.) I offered to pay for the trip, but he refused and both he and his wife were gone before I even made it to the sidewalk. I looked at my watch and realized that he had less than ten minutes before the flight to Ohio left. **[Today it would be literally impossible to make that flight, but this was before 9/11 imposed absurdly early mandatory check-in times.]**

I, on the other hand, had about an hour to kill in Minneapolis **[which these days would be nothing]**. Hubert H. Humphrey Terminal is home of Northwest Airlines, and that one carrier truly overwhelms the airport. There are only a few token flights on any other airline, and three and a half of the four main concourses are exclusive to Northwest. **[They've since completely re-done MSP, and Northwest dominates the place even more.]**

The airport is pleasant. I had never been there before **[strange to think, since I've been through there more times than I can count since]**, and I didn't really know what to expect. It's an enormous barn of an airport, but it was relatively simple to figure out. I had been let off clear at one end (where flights to obscure destinations like Lima depart), and I soon figured out that I had to pretty much walk the length of the terminal to find the gate for Orlando.

The most noticeable thing at the airport is fast food. The airport commission has provided franchises to McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Burger King, T.C.B.Y., Karmelkorn, and hosts of other chain restaurants to operate in the airport. The whole place has the appearance of an overgrown food court in a mall. There's not much in the way of shops, but you can get any kind of fast food you could ever want. I rushed into one of the McDonalds locations and ordered pizza, which they are apparently experimenting with adding to their menu. After forking over airport prices for it (and a **long** wait), I got a microscopic personal pizza that wasn't really very good. Just as I finally got it, they called my flight for boarding.

[Since the renovation, MSP has turned from a food court into a true mall. From the point of view of a traveler with time on their hands, it's really one of the best airports anywhere. Another change they've made is a requirement that the concessionaires charge standard market-rate prices rather than gouging tourists at the airport. The restaurants at the airport now charge the same as the locations down the road at Mall of America or those in downtown Minneapolis.]

The flight to Orlando was not one of the nicest I've been on. Given a choice, I'll probably avoid flying Northwest in the future. **[That's a laugh. These days Northwest is the only carrier in most small Midwestern airports, and since Minneapolis is the only hub remotely nearby, they pretty much have the monopoly on my business.]** (Then again, that's pretty much impossible to do when making connections out of Mason City. **[As I just said...]**) It was a crowded flight on a not terribly clean plane, and the flight attendants were rather surly. It was also a **long** flight. You realize just how big America is when you start in the middle of the country and then have to fly three and a half hours just to get to the corner. (Actually, we all know Minneapolis is quite a bit north of the middle—but it's also east of center, so it averages out.) We had a snack and saw a movie (Steve Martin's "Father of the Bride") in that time, but it still left a lot of dull time. On the positive side, I did get all caught up on the ungraded papers that had been accumulating at school.

[Flying has changed quite a bit since 1992. These days flying from Mason City to Orlando would most likely involve an additional connection in either Memphis or Detroit. There's probably only one or two direct Minneapolis/Orlando flights in a day. That makes each hunk of the flight a bit shorter, but also requires negotiating another airport. The flights these days would likely be on smaller planes—though they'd almost certainly be cleaner than the one I flew on here. There also would be no meal offered. The only food would be an opportunity to buy a box of assorted snack foods or a bag of trail mix. Starting this summer, they're even charging for beverages—something I really can't blame them for when they're paying even more for fuel than car drivers do.]

Another comment on America's vastness was the dramatic change in weather this flight brought us. It was 37 degrees and gloomy when we left Minneapolis. The whole Midwest was fog-bound and miserable. If you ask me, Florida was also miserable—but in quite a different way. When we arrived in Orlando, it was bright and sunny, but 86 degrees and a steam bath. To my mind, 86 degrees in April is punishment. Fortunately I had slipped into the restroom in Minneapolis and changed from my sweatshirt and jacket into short sleeves and shorts. I felt retarded walking around that way in Minnesota, but I was thankful for it when I got to the tropical heat of Florida. (By the way, Floridians don't seem to think that 86 degrees is particularly hot. Of course, I wouldn't either—in August. It's dealing with it in the spring that's the problem.)

Orlando International Airport is some architect's nightmare. It's supposed to be the nicest airport in America, and it's not bad looking. The problem is that it's needlessly complicated and disorganized. Give me dumpy old O'Hare anytime. It's not exactly a work

of art, either. The grounds near the terminals are beautifully landscaped, but the area by the runways looks like a patch of desert in the middle of a rainforest. Inside the terminals look like (and basically are) a snooty shopping mall.

You'll notice that I said terminals (plural). Orlando International isn't a particularly large airport, and while they do get a lot of tourists, there's no particular reason for having two separate terminals that seem to be miles apart. They do, though, and the airport people seem to think that's part of the fun. My flight arrived at Terminal B. I was expecting someone to meet me at the gate **[something else that would be impossible in the post 9/11 age]**, but when I got off no one (at all) was there. In fact all of Terminal B seemed pretty deserted. I figured out it might be sensible to look in the baggage claim area, so even though I hadn't checked any luggage, I followed the signs. They led outside to a train station. It turns out that Terminal B is just a satellite gate area. Everything important in the airport is in Terminal A, and you have to take a monorail between the two. It was amusing that Disney city should have a monorail at its airport, but it did seem strange that the bags were taken somewhere different than the passengers. I took the train (about a five-minute trip) and eventually made it to the main terminal.

As I mentioned, Terminal A is basically a big shopping mall. In fact, the fact that's also an airport seems to get lost amid all the shops. They provide every opportunity for tourists to buy their first or last souvenirs of the Sunshine State. The signs are confusing, but I did eventually take an escalator down to the basement, and I did find baggage claim. I also found Tony ..., the son of [my friend] Sandra, who would be staying with. Sandra had just had foot surgery, so Tony made the trip into Orlando to pick me up.

Tony and Kristine, his girlfriend, greeted me warmly, and we set off through a maze of escalators and tunnels to get to a huge parking ramp. We crowded into Tony's little sports car. **["Little" is definitely the word for it. I've driven subcompact cars all my life, but there was more room in any of them than in Tony's car. The back seat was definitely designed never to be used, but somehow we made it work.]** Tony then negotiated a maze of interchanges, and we were eventually on the Florida Turnpike. We headed northwest out of Orlando, stopping briefly at a McDonalds in Wildwood, one of those places that seems to exist mainly because it's at the interchange of two freeways. We then took I-75 northward to Gainesville.

My initial impressions of central Florida were nothing spectacular. None of the places we went through were all that large (Orlando is smaller than Des Moines, Gainesville is like Waterloo or Sioux City, and Ocala—the only thing in between—isn't much larger than Mason City or Ft. Dodge). All of them, though, came across as endless urban sprawl carved out of the swamps. **[All have also multiplied in population since 1992, and with their many suburbs it is a MAJOR center of population.]** I don't know when I've seen so many shopping malls or condominium developments or industrial parks in my life. The difference between these cities and comparably sized places elsewhere in the country is that up north the places have been cities for years. They have well-developed downtown areas and just a few suburban strips on the edges. You certainly see suburban development in the Midwest (how many of my students have moved to Urbandale or to all those places with cute names by Minneapolis?), but for business and culture you negotiate the skywalks, parking ramps, and skyscrapers downtown.

[That is something I found truly bizarre in Florida. I'd find years later that Orlando does have a substantial city center, though even it would be dwarfed by downtown Cedar Rapids. Most of the large cities in central Florida are pretty much ALL suburban. IF there is a downtown at all, it looks like it belongs in a small town. All the stadiums and cultural facilities are convenient to exits on the freeways. While it's California that has the reputation for car-dominated suburbs, the cities there are really much more traditional than those in Florida.]

In central Florida, you don't see skyscrapers or skywalks, and the only parking ramp I saw was at the airport. The whole area basically seemed to me like a bunch of small towns that have mushroomed in population just recently **[which is exactly what they are]**. Gainesville is a prime example. Its downtown looks a lot like Spencer, Iowa (population 10,000), and pretty much nothing seems to happen there. Everywhere, though (and I mean everywhere), there are lavish suburban developments—and almost all of them look brand new. I'd be interested to see the area in twenty or thirty years. It would be interesting to see if it looks like all those seedy suburbs from the '50s you see up north (Moline comes to mind—or all those places along highway 30 in Chicago), or whether modern construction ages somewhat better.

It was really strange to see big cities with no tall buildings and nothing very old. Even in Urbandale and Burnsville they build mini-skyscrapers in the office parks, and both of those classic suburbs have older areas where the homes all have different personalities. The industrial buildings in Florida all look like warehouses **[which is in most cases precisely what they are]**, the shopping areas all seem to be "mall-ettes", and there's an overabundance of look-alike condos. I know I'm dwelling on this, but it really was vastly different—almost like visiting a foreign country.

The other thing I noticed on the ride back from the airport was traffic. The interstates in Florida are horribly overcrowded. Between the urban sprawl, most of the time we were driving through scrubby forest with nothing in the way of development. Even there the traffic never let up. I-75 is four lanes, and it definitely needs to be six. All this traffic (including us) travels far above the speed limit, and you get the feeling that if you didn't, you'd be run down quickly.

It's quite a long trip from Orlando to Gainesville (about two hours, even at freeway speeds). That was my first clue that this was not exactly an opportune time to be visiting Sandra. I had met her at USM the previous summer, and we joked about the possibility of my visiting her during the year. I decided I'd probably never see the "touristic" part of Florida otherwise, so I took her up on her offer. Between then and now her life had changed rather dramatically. She had been teaching talented and gifted students in a "rural area" (more on that later) west of Orlando—which is why I had booked the flight into Orlando airport. At Christmas she had vacationed in Hawaii, met up with an old flame, and become engaged. Between Christmas and Easter she had quit her job, sold her home, packed up everything to ship to Hawaii, and moved in with her son and his girlfriend in a condo in Gainesville. On top of everything, just before

I arrived she had the foot surgery. As I said, this wasn't exactly the best time I could have picked for a visit. It wasn't quite the vacation I had in mind, but it did turn out to be interesting and fun.

We had a pleasant ride to Gainesville. Both Tony and Kristine were hospitable and easy to talk with, which I wasn't entirely sure would be true. I'm always shy around new people, so it was good that we got along so well.

It was fairly late when we arrived in Gainesville, and we drove about a mile west from the interstate to the little look-alike development where Kristine's parents had bought the condo that she and Tony were living in. The place is on "Southwest 44th Lane" (not to be confused with 44th Street, 44th Avenue, 44th Drive, etc.), and it's definitely on the edge of town. It's really quite a secluded development, set off from what will be a four lane highway by a wall of trees. The homes are nice, and it's beautifully wooded. The whole development was painted blue, though **[and maintaining the blue look is a requirement of condo ownership]**, and I must say I got tired of that.

The house was another reminder that this was not the best time to visit. Sandra was giving her furniture to Tony (which gave them nice stuff for the condo), but she had everything else boxed up to be shipped to Hawaii. There were boxes everywhere. It reminded me of when my sister Margaret moved from a big house in town into a tiny farmhouse right after her husband died. Margaret never really did finish unpacking (which was probably for the best in that dumpy little house), and there was always a sea of boxes. The condo would be quite pleasant for Tony and Kristine, but with two extra people, a big dog, and all that stuff around, it was really quite cramped.

Sandra had made supper. I forget what most of it was, but I certainly do remember one thing. We had artichokes with clarified butter. Sandra will probably eventually read this travelogue—so accept my apologies, but know that I'm always frank and honest. I'm sure they considered this a treat, but it was more an "experience" to the taste buds of this uncouth Midwesterner. In all honesty, I had no clue even how to eat them, and I was too embarrassed to ask. I tried to swallow the whole leaf (or whatever) and probably got more than my supply of fiber for the week. Fortunately for me, this was also Kristine's first experience with them, and she did ask. As I'm sure Miss Manners would tell you, the only part you actually eat is the tiny fleshy part at one end. You dip them into the butter and then scrape it off with your teeth. You then discard the rest. I tried that, but I still can't say it's exactly my favorite taste treat. They have a strong and rather bitter taste which I'm sure I could get used to, but in all honesty I'm glad it's a food that's generally beyond my budget.

We had some drinks, watched a bit of television, and sat up and talked until quite late. I was given Tony's room to sleep in. He and Kristine shared a room, and Sandra slept on a hide-a-bed in the living room (which made sense, since her foot made it difficult to go upstairs). I went over the events of the day as I drifted off to sleep, and it was certainly a full and interesting one.

EASTER SUNDAY – April 19

We got up relatively late this morning. We had homemade western omelettes for breakfast (or more appropriately brunch) and watched Rem and Stimp, two surreal cartoon characters who repeatedly massacre each other—much like "Itchy and Scratchy" on *The Simpsons*. I'd never seen that show before, but Tony assures me it's the biggest thing there is among the college crowd these days. It is amusing—sort of a parody of bad cartoons.

About noon Sandra and I set off for our first adventure around central Florida. Sandra wasn't supposed to drive, so I got the privilege of driving her beautiful car. (While it's unusual for me, that's not sarcasm—she's got a gorgeous car loaded with every option, and it was really fun to drive.) We drove right through the heart of Gainesville (which is where I saw that Spencer "skyline"—that is sarcasm this time) and out on Florida highway 20, a little two-lane that heads eastward to the coast. Tony and Sandra had warned me about driving this road, which is apparently notorious for its speed traps. They had especially warned me about the "rural" and "remote" town of Palatka. Tony had gone on for some time about it, and I was pretty much expecting those cops in *Porky's* to come out of the swamps with guns pointed.

The rural areas were pretty seedy. There were lots and lots of cement block houses with peeling paint set in clearings in the scrubby forest. It looked a lot like Mexico. Palatka, though, is rural and remote only in the sense that it doesn't have the endless suburban sprawl that plagues Gainesville and Orlando. It's basically a developed, old Midwestern-style town, larger even than most county seat towns. The atlas says it's got 11,000 people, but it came across as somewhat larger than that. The downtown area is developed and active, and there's a lovely urban renewal project along the St. John's River—with parks, a civic center, and even a Holiday Inn. It's really a very pleasant community, and to me it was refreshing after the endless condos and warehouses and malls of Orlando and Gainesville.

We crossed the St. John's (which is beautiful) and followed highway 207 northeast to St. Augustine. We had thought that Easter might be a less crowded time in a tourist spot like St. Augustine. What we hadn't bargained on was that Easter was the city's annual festival day. (When you think about it, it makes sense—Florida was named after the Spanish "Pascua Florida" or Easter Sunday; of course the state's oldest city would celebrate its fiesta on Easter.) The place was packed, and they were blocking off streets to get ready for a big parade. We drove around the downtown area for a while. It would have been difficult for Sandra to walk much, and I didn't really have a lot of interest in seeing anything in particular, so we just drove around. It was fun to see, though, and overall it reminded me a lot of Quebec City.

We drove out to the "Fountain of Youth" and parked there. I went to the ticket booth. Not only did it cost \$7.00 each, but they had no wheelchairs, so if we saw it Sandra would have had to walk. Just paying that much for a fake reconstruction of a mythical site was enough to turn me off, so we passed on it. They had a little garden near the parking lot with a fountain in the middle of it, so I snapped a picture of that "fountain of youth". I never did drink water from it, though, so I guess that's why I really did turn a year older last fall.

Back downtown we went to a commercially-sponsored visitor's center where they showed a film on the history of St. Augustine. The cost is normally quite steep, but by saying we were teachers, Sandra and I got in free. The film was interesting, and I learned a lot about a part of history I hadn't even thought about since elementary school.

By the time we left the visitor's center, the parade had started, so we had to find a different way out of town. We made our way on back streets to the suburban strip at the west edge of St. Augustine, where a cop directed us to join the rest of the line of cars that was detouring around the parade. We drove through a McDonalds for coffee and fries and then set off down the coast.

As we were driving today I kept thinking of my parents' honeymoon. Among the millions of places they visited was the Florida coast. I kept wondering what the place must have looked like in the 1940s, or for that matter even in the 1970s. It must surely have been vastly different than today. We took the scenic coastal highway, A1A, which runs from Jacksonville down to Miami Beach. Somehow I expected to see water driving along a coastal highway, but at best there were only rare glimpses of the ocean. What we saw instead was a wall of hotels and condominiums. The highway is still definitely scenic (the buildings are really quite lovely), but it really bothered me that there was so much development right along the coast. I like the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, where in most places they've outlawed development on the beach side of the highway. There you can see the condos (as well as grand old mansions) on one side of the road, but you also have sand and sea on the other. There were places in Florida where it was like driving through a tunnel between the condos.

I'm sure the beachfront developments have a lovely view (although I'd hate to be in them in a hurricane), but I could never figure out why anyone would buy a condo on the inland side of the highway. There the only view is of other condos. I suppose they must cost a lot less, and I'm pretty sure most of the beaches are public property so it would be worth it to be able to walk to the water.

There was one other place I've seen development like this, the Costa del Sol in Spain. The whole area around Marbella and Torremolinos looks almost exactly like the east coast of Florida. I suppose there are many other such developments elsewhere on earth, but for the most part I'd take a more secluded beach any day.

We stopped a few times at souvenir shops, and we parked at a couple of pull-outs where you can walk down to the beach. I didn't go swimming or anything, but I did get some nice pictures of the Atlantic (mostly at a place called Flagler Beach).



Beachside sign with the Atlantic in the background – Flagler Beach, Florida

One of the places we stopped was in the town of Ormond Beach. It's a pleasant place, but I wouldn't remember it except for something I read later. Apparently all along the coast (as well as inland near Disney World) are spring training camps for various major league baseball teams. When I was in Mississippi the following summer, I read about a big gang rape that several star players had committed in Ormond Beach. It apparently developed into a big sticky trial—everyone agrees that the players and a bunch of baseball groupies had every kind of sex imaginable (the article went into great detail about that); the question is about the technicalities of rape and how willing the groupies were to have sex with their favorite players. When I read that article, I was reminded that Gainesville was in the news a couple of years ago for the rapes and murders of a bunch of college girls. Things appear to have calmed down since then, but it does make you wonder about Florida. **[The trial involved the core of the New York Mets team, and the alleged incident would have happened about a month before I was down in Florida. At the time I never heard how it came out. I just did a quick Google search, and it's amazing just how easy it is to find old news archives. The prosecutor apparently dropped all charges (citing lack of evidence) about halfway through the 1992 baseball season, probably shortly after I'd read the article in Mississippi.]**

Apparently the beachfront is developed for hundreds of miles—all the way from north of Jacksonville clear down to south of Miami. **[Having later been down to Miami, I can verify the southern part looks pretty much the same.]** We only drove a small fraction of that distance, about sixty miles from St. Augustine to Daytona. Of the whole area, Daytona Beach was my favorite part by far. In Daytona you can actually drive your car for miles right on the beach. They've compacted the sand so it's a lot like driving on a gravel road. I had seen pictures of the Spring Break crowd doing that, and since we were there it was something I had to do. At the north end of Daytona it's not very busy. We stopped and snapped some shots of us and the car with the ocean in the background.

As you get toward central Daytona, though, things are pretty jammed. This is Spring Break central, and it's full of college kids on the make. **[It's should come as no surprise to anyone that many of the *Girls Gone Wild* videos were made in Daytona.]** We were obviously quite a bit older than anyone else in town, and we were out of place without loud boxers or string bikinis—but it was still fun to join the line of cruisers on the beach.

[It really amazed me that I liked Daytona. It was THE place for Spring Break back when I was in college. I, of course, could never have afforded to go anywhere for break at the time, and I always rather made fun of the spoiled brat kids from the Greek houses who did. While the modern equivalent of those kids were definitely there in force, but even with them the place has a pleasant laid-back atmosphere. I had fun there.]

We left Daytona on a road that passes the famous speedway (which is huge) and then drove through a forest preserve back to Ocala. Sandra had wanted to take me to a traditional spring in Ocala, but they were closed by the time we got there, so we just drove through town and out onto one of those suburban strips. We stopped in Ocala to have dinner at an Olive Garden restaurant. It's only the second time I'd eaten at one (the other being when I flew back from Spain and John and Janet took me to one in Moline). It's a lovely chain with some of the best Italian food I've gotten anywhere.

We got home quite late and watched some more TV. ... Eventually it became a logical time to go to bed.

MONDAY, April 20

This was a strange day—hardly what you'd expect on a vacation, but certainly interesting. We got up very early this morning. The air conditioning in Sandra's car hadn't been working when we were driving around yesterday. That didn't bother me (although I did get the classic driving tan), but it did need to be fixed. That was first on the agenda today.

As we went outside I got a taste of classic Florida weather. It's extremely humid here, and dew collects on everything. Sandra, Tony, and Kristine all kept squeegees in their cars to wipe the dew off their windshields. It's every bit as routine to them as scraping frost off a window is to an Iowan.

We drove to the other end of Gainesville, to what appeared to be the one and only Chrysler dealer in town. Tony followed in his car so we would have a way of getting back after dumping the car. It turned out that we spent quite a bit more time at the car dealer than we had planned. Sandra's car was relatively new, and she had bought the extended service contracts for it. Unfortunately, when the dealer called it up on the computer, there was no record of her having a service contract. They argued for some time, and eventually they figured out what the problem was. Apparently the dealer she had bought the car from in West Palm Beach had sold her not a Chrysler contract, but one from some secondary insurance company. Moreover, they had never actually filed the contract, but rather pocketed the extra profit for themselves. There was quite a bit of an argument, but eventually we did manage to get most things straightened out.

Tony took a "scenic" way home, giving me a tour of the University of Florida campus. He then took Kristine's car and went off to school himself. ... I set off to walk around the neighborhood. It was about a mile from the condo to a McDonalds at the interchange with I-75. It was an interesting McDonalds. The dining room was full of art displays from local artists, and it made a pleasant setting as I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. ... I went past McDonalds this time to a little mall-ette where a brand new Target store had opened. I browsed for quite a while and ended up buying a souvenir of Gainesville—a "Florida Gators" football jersey. I stopped for another cup of coffee at McDonalds, bought a newspaper, and then headed back.

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Our outing today basically consisted of running errands. We first went to the State Farm office, where Sandra needed to transfer the insurance on both her car and Tony's. While there I got a shock from the prices that people pay for insurance in Florida. Sandra said she knew things would go up when she transferred from "rural" Homasassa to "urban" Gainesville, but she didn't seem too upset about the rates. I, on the other hand, was completely floored. Even with the assorted discounts that State Farm gives out like water, the semi-annual bill for two cars was around my monthly salary. I had heard before (mainly from people who moved to Minnesota) that insurance rates in Iowa were low, but it took this for me to believe it. I pay about \$150 twice a year to insure my little car **[it's about double that these days]**, and I expected the bill for Sandra's luxury car and a young male's sports car to be more. Many times more was unexpected, though. (I found a more realistic comparison recently when my young friend James bought a Pontiac Grand Prix. He complains about his insurance, but it's still about half of what Tony's car costs in Florida.) It made me wonder just how many accidents and car thefts they have here, for the rate to be so high. **[The answer is A LOT—Florida has just about the highest insurance rates in the country, and costs are directly related to what the companies pay out in claims.]**

The secretary at State Farm was selling her daughter's Girl Scout cookies. I picked up a couple of boxes of things I'd never seen before. I got some sugar, nut, and coconut concoction that was terribly sweet but not bad and some lemon-flavored sugar cookies. **[It does seem strange to me that the Girl Scouts sell different products in different parts of the country. They occasionally talk about Girl Scout cookies on various TV shows, and invariably they'll mention types I've never heard of. The "thin mints" seem to be the only universal cookie.]**

Tony, the classic college student, had let his gas tank nearly run dry, and Sandra gave me some money to buy gas while she was doing the paperwork for the insurance. I found a gas station easily, but then I ran into a problem. When I got out I realized that Tony's gas tank was locked, and there obviously had to be some sort of release for it inside the car. I had no clue, though, how to get the tank door open. I even pawed through the glove compartment and got out the owner's manual. I learned all about the wonders of unleaded fuel, but I never did find out how to open up the tank. The gauge was below "E", but I drove back to State Farm and prayed that Sandra would know how it worked and that we'd have enough fumes to make it to another station.

She did, and we did. It turned out that the release was on the floor, next to the seat adjustment switch. Apparently that's a common location, but I've never seen it before. I like things simple—like on my base-model car, where the car key opens the gas tank.

We drove around for a while trying to find a place to eat. Eventually we found a Wendy's on yet another suburban strip and went in to get some food. I was amused that this Wendy's accepted major credit cards. It would never occur to me to use a credit card at a fast food joint, but since they did, of course I had to try mine out. I had a bill of less than five dollars, but I flashed my American Express and the girl took it without a blink. She ran it through the phone and gave me a receipt. The weird thing was that I didn't even have to sign anything. I suppose fraud isn't a major concern on bills the size of a fast food lunch. **[These days, of course, pretty much everyone accepts credit cards. I still think it's bizarre to use a credit card for something like a fast food lunch, though I do use "scrip" gift cards (which are processed the same way) a lot. Many of the kids I teach use debit cards as their primary form of payment and only rarely deal with cash.]**

I amused myself in the afternoon watching Sandra make endless phone calls. First she had to figure out what was up with her service contract and see to it that the place in Palm Beach either made it right or refunded her money. Then she called around to look into the least expensive option for shipping her stuff to Hawaii. (Basically, there's no such thing as an inexpensive option for shipping stuff to Hawaii, but she did her best.) She was also planning to make a family vacation when she took her stuff to the islands, and she was comparing the prices of driving to California and then flying from there or flying all the way. Airfares were dropping almost literally as she dialed the phone, so there was no clear winner.

Late in the afternoon we went to claim the car. They had replaced some minor part and said things should be okay. There was a chance, though, that something major could go wrong with the air conditioner compressor—which would mean big money. They sent Sandra through a series of high-pressure salespeople who wanted her to buy a Chrysler service contract to replace the one that the other dealer had defrauded her on. Everything sounded great, but understandably she didn't want to sign anything on the spot. We did take a bunch of flyers, though, and went on our way.

We stopped at a Chinese place for some take-out food (which was excellent **[I think it's the only time in my life I've actually had Chinese TAKE-OUT; I've always eaten in at Chinese restaurants]**) and then stopped at ABC, one of a chain of liquor stores that is all over Florida. **[The initials stand for Alcohol Board of Control, and at least at the time it was the state liquor monopoly. I think Florida—like Iowa—has since privatized liquor sales.]** I had seen orange wine at the airport and was looking for some as a souvenir for Margaret. They had none of that, but they were certainly well-stocked with everything else. Sandra felt the prices were steep, but they were certainly cheap compared with Midwestern taxes. I got some ABC brand spiced rum and an ABC shot glass as souvenirs, and Sandra got some drinks to have with dinner. We went home, ate, and spent the evening doing some more catching up on things.

It poured tonight—as it did pretty much every night on the trip. It poured and poured and poured. It reminded me of those sheets of rain we used to get around Easter time in Mt. Pleasant when I was growing up. The newspapers made a note for recent residents that his was nowhere near a record rain, but it was enough to turn a sinkhole near the condos into a lake. It made me wonder how the state could have such water problems, when they seem to get so much rain. I guess everything just disappears into the sandy soil and is more or less wasted. **[I would think they could trap rainwater, perhaps in a network of rooftop reservoirs—a modern version of how people used to get their water. Instead they've drained the Everglades and still can't seem to get enough water.]**

TUESDAY, April 21

[I'm amazed reading this how long of a break we had in 1992, since normally we'd be back in school at this point. Normally our time off at Easter comes mostly BEFORE the holiday. I think I may have also taken a personal day, but even with that this was a surprisingly long vacation.]

We were up quite early this morning for a full day of exploring. We stopped briefly at that McDonalds by the interchange and then headed down I-75 to Ocala. Traffic was lighter this morning, but it was still a lot like I-80 in Iowa **[which to me is fairly heavy traffic]**.

Sandra had her foot surgery done in Ocala, and she had a follow-up appointment this morning with the doctor there. I found the place fairly easily, waited for a while in the waiting room, and then set out to explore the area on foot. There was certainly nothing outstanding I noticed about Ocala. It's a pleasant little city, but about as generic as you can get. **[That would be true of virtually everywhere in Florida.]** The doctor was in a little office complex on yet another suburban strip. The thing that distinguishes this as Florida (as opposed to, say, New Jersey) is the landscaping. Real grass doesn't seem to grow well here, so instead they substitute ornamental plants like flowers and palmettos. Also, Florida seems to have an unusual attraction to pastel colors. Everything seems to be stucco or cement blocks, but it's all painted pink and aqua. It's like the architects in the state got all their ideas over lunch in a Mexican restaurant.

I also couldn't get over how few private homes there were in Ocala. The ones that do exist seem to be either old run-down places in town, secluded little bungalows in the woods, or mansions. You just don't see many of those split-levels with the basketball hoops in the driveway that dominate the scenery in the North. I suppose when you consider the population that makes sense. While Iowa has a higher percentage of elderly people than Florida, here the old people either live in their own homes or in public housing. In Florida they buy condos. There are even more single yuppies in Florida than in Minnesota, and they also live in apartments and condos. What you don't see much of is the traditional middle-aged, middle-class family—precisely those people who fill the suburbs in the Midwest. **[I am wondering what's happening as the yuppies age.]**

The other problem I noticed at the doctor's office is how difficult parking is at all those mall-ettes. While there's an incredible amount of land paved over in Florida, they haven't been very efficient about their parking lots. The doctor's office was in a line of offices that went back from the street at a right angle. There was a narrow driveway with parking to one side of it. It was awkward to park, and there wasn't really enough parking for the size of the development. I noticed that a lot of places in Florida. Again, I think it has to do with the fact that the place has mushroomed in size so quickly. I also think, though, that there must be an awful lot of developers who built cheaply and were more concerned about profits than conveniences **[...and the standard lack of regulation in the South so it's not required that things like adequate parking be put in].**

I got one other clue to this exponential growth when I was thumbing through a chamber of commerce brochure at the doctor's office. I found out that Marion County (Ocala) is the single fastest-growing area in America. **[That's no longer true, though it continues to grow.]** I also found out (to my definite surprise) that there's almost no commercial land for sale in Ocala. Instead all those offices, mall-ettes, and warehouses are rental property. The developers build them and hope someone comes along to fill the space. Apparently the tax laws are such that the developers aren't out that much even if the buildings remain vacant. That seems absurd to me, but then one thing I'm definitely not is a real estate tycoon. **[Apparently it's fairly standard nationwide that businesses occupy rental property. Supposedly there's less risk to the business that way. It's also what allows places like Wal-Mart to so easily abandon their old stores in favor of new ones rather than renovating and expanding the existing buildings. That still seems strange to me, but then that's probably why I'm not rich.]**

I kept pondering all the time I was in Florida exactly what they do there to employ all those millions of people who keep moving there. It seems like an idiotic place to build a factory—thousands of miles from any market other than itself—and there really doesn't seem to be much in the way of "real" industry. Supposedly there's some agriculture (although the oranges were pretty much killed off by that freeze a few years back), but I can't picture that employing very many people. The tourist trade is certainly big, but it's hard to imagine seventeen million people working in it. Mostly there seem to be tons and tons and tons of those "service sector" jobs that have appeared everywhere in the '80s. It's yuppie-type people that have those jobs, too. You don't see the elderly or retarded people punching cash registers, like you do in Iowa—normal, working-age adults do those jobs in Florida. It's like everyone just provides services to each other. I suppose with enough people you can make that work, but it's hard to imagine anyone becoming rich doing that. I still can't imagine why so many people would move thousands of miles for a minimum-wage job.

... OK, OK—a look out my window reminded me. It was 19 below in Algona this morning **[New Years Day 1993, when I originally wrote this]**, and there's ice and snow all over everything. The Weather Channel tells me that it's 84 and sunny in Orlando today, and I suppose that's the motivation for a lot of people. Still, I've learned to brave the elements—and when I don't want to, that's what engine block heaters, covered parking, and skywalks are for. I'm also not sure sauna weather in winter is exactly what I'd call ideal—I'd settle for cool and crisp year round. John and Janet tell me San Francisco is like that, and I think that would be more my style.

Well, enough about that. It still hurt Sandra a lot to walk, but she was instructed to try to use her foot more. She even got permission to drive by the end of next week.

Shortly after we left the doctor's office, it began to pour again. The rain was so bad that it was really difficult to drive. We thought we'd have breakfast to kill some time and let the rain let up, so we stopped at a mall. Unfortunately nothing was open. They

didn't even have one of those fitness walks available before shopping hours. Eventually we pulled into a Perkins. We got thoroughly soaked just going from the parking lot to the restaurant, but we had a leisurely time eating their breakfast special and managed to dry out a bit.

It continued to rain after we finished breakfast, but it had let up enough that it least it was safe to drive. Our destination today was Citrus County, the "rural" area where Sandra used to live. I had looked it up in the atlas at home, and on paper it does come across as quite rural. The county seat, Inverness, has 4,500 people. Other main towns include Homosassa (1,400) and Crystal River (2,700). From that description, we could be anywhere in Iowa. What the atlas neglected to mention was that Citrus County as a whole has a population of 95,000. While that does make it one of the smallest counties in Florida, it's huge compared with the 10 – 20,000 in the rural counties of Iowa. What actually happens is that practically no one in Citrus County lives in an incorporated area. Instead they all live in one of the countless housing developments spread throughout the woods. **[This is a way developers get around regulation. The towns often do pass building codes similar to what you'd find up north, but in the unincorporated areas pretty much anything goes.]**

One of the places we went was the lakeside house by Homosassa where Sandra used to live. She had described it as "remote", and it certainly is a challenge to get to. Except that everything is paved, it's about as complicated as getting to Margaret's place over by Decarah. There the similarity ends, though. Margaret is, of course, **way** out in the country **[though here area has filled in more and more over the years]**. Decarah proper is **much** larger than Homosassa, but when the town ends there's nothing really until you get to Waukon. There's miles of forest and farmland between "Grouse Valley Road" (where Margaret lives) and anything. There's lots of forest in Citrus County, too, and supposedly deer run through the trees frequently, but what there seems to be mostly is housing developments. All the twisty, windy roads are lined with homes. They're private homes, and they're mostly spaced out, so it's not like you're exactly in town—but it's hard to describe as "rural". Having said that, the place where Sandra used to live is lovely. It's a pleasant little development around a lake, and I can certainly see why she chose it.



We drove into Inverness, a place desperately in need of a highway bypass, and on to the home of some friends of Sandra's, Gary and Kathwren Jenkins. They are artists who you may have seen on one of those Saturday afternoon shows on public TV. Their current show is taped at a station in Tampa and doesn't air in Iowa, but I know I have seen Gary Jenkins on IPTV in the past. **[The show is apparently still going in 2008, though the two of them have to well past retirement age. The background for their website is shown above and to the left.]**

The Jenkins have a palatial home. The only thing I disliked about it was its exterior color—orange—but again, that's pretty typical in Florida. Apparently the place used to be a boarding house, and parts were added on as there was a need for more space. Today it's both enormous and beautiful. The woodwork is spectacular. Kathwren has each room decorated with a theme, and they have a lot of their own artwork displayed throughout the place. Today they host seminars where artists come in, stay at the place in a bed and breakfast set-up, and take lessons in their studio.

... The Jenkins were certainly gracious hosts. We got the grand tour of their home, saw their studio **[which was honestly quite fun]** and many of their paintings, and they offered us drinks as we watched a tape of their latest show. It was fun, and it certainly wasn't an experience I would be likely to have in rural Iowa.

[Sandra knew these people because she had been a professional artist on and off herself. She primarily painted seascapes (which is interesting for someone who grew up in Indiana), and her technique was unique because she painted with a palette knife (the tool normally used to mix colors) rather than a brush. While the bulk of her experience was painting what she called "tourist art" (like endless renditions of the Golden Gate Bridge she sold cheaply on the boardwalk at Fisherman's Wharf), she has exhibited paintings in galleries and sold them for values in the thousands of dollars.]



**Damage done by exotic animals
Homosassa Wildlife Refuge**

they don't seem to have any useful purpose at all. Later in the summer, while visiting the NASA facility in Mississippi, I found out that NASA is working on a way to use water hyacinths for water treatment. That's one thing they seem to do quite well. Maybe science will find a way to solve the problem.

We stopped for ice cream and coffee after seeing the park, and then we sped down side roads back to Gainesville. We got to the car dealer shortly before they closed and argued some more about the service contract (which seemed to exclude or place a high deductible on anything that would possibly go wrong). Then we decided to find somewhere to have dinner.

The previous summer in Mississippi we had repeatedly gone to a Mexican restaurant called Cuco's for drinks after plays or night classes. Both of us were certain we had seen a Cuco's somewhere when we had driven around before. The problem was, we couldn't remember where we had seen it. We drove around, seemingly forever, trying to find it. We looked out by the interchange where McDonalds was (which is where we thought we had seen it). Then we looked out by the car dealer again. Then we looked in the neighborhood by the Chinese restaurant we had stopped at. Then we looked out by State Farm. Then we went out by the Wendy's we had stopped at. Then we went to the east end of town where we had gone the first day. We re-traced our steps countless times, putting no less than 42 miles on the car just driving around Gainesville. Eventually we stopped at a drugstore and tried to look it up in a phone book. Unfortunately their directory was out of date, and Cuco's was nowhere to be found. We had pretty much given up and were driving home when we saw it—right by the interchange where we thought it was all along, but on the other side of the road. We had both been looking on the side where McDonalds and Target were, and it was across the street.

Having made such a production of finding the place, we ordered quite an elaborate dinner. I had the fajita platter, where sizzling meat is served in a skillet with assorted Mexican condiments on the side. It was pricey, and probably not worth it, but it was fun.

Tonight Sandra spent much of her time trying to finalize plans for going to Hawaii. She made repeated phone calls to Hawaii, to Arizona, and to a travel agency her credit card sponsors in Tennessee. She also made motel reservations for us tomorrow night near Disney World. The phone certainly got a work-out, and it was entertaining watching her.

WEDNESDAY, April 22

We left very late this morning. I packed up all my stuff, because the plan was not to return to Gainesville. ... Today we were trying to see the real touristic Florida. We were headed for Walt Disney World. We again stopped at McDonalds for coffee (or rather I had coffee; Sandra had tea). Then we were again off on I-75 for Ocala.

About the time we arrived in Ocala we thought we smelled smoke. We pulled into a gas station and realized that smoke was indeed billowing from the hood. We debated a bit on what to do and decided that we hoped it was some problem with the air conditioning. We figured we would try to live without the air conditioner and see if that solved the problem.

There's a rest area at Ocala run by the Disney people. We stopped there, bought our entry tickets (which saved a long line at the gate), and picked up a few souvenirs. We checked the engine again, decided it wasn't on fire anymore, and were off down the interstate.

We decided not to take the turnpike, but rather a free road west of there (U.S. 27), which advertised itself as the quickest route to Disney. I was skeptical of that, figuring it would take us past every tacky tourist attraction in the state en route. It turned out to be a delightful drive, though. The area was really quite rural. Until recently most of this was orange groves. After the killing freeze, most of the orchards were abandoned. A few have been re-started, and others are being turned into housing developments. Traffic was comparatively light, and it was fun just to see the countryside. Eventually we made our way through a maze of interchanges and were in the Disney complex.

A hint for anyone who ever wants to see a major theme park: pretend that someone in your party is handicapped. For the cost of renting a wheelchair, you get better parking and you skirt the lines at most of the attractions. We found this out because, with Sandra's surgery, she really was handicapped—in the sense that there's no way she could have walked around to all the attractions in the park. No one asked any questions when we asked for a handicapped parking sticker for the lot right next to the entrance (rather than the ones you have to take a bus to get to). Then we got a wheelchair with a leg lift and pretty much saw what we wanted to when we wanted to.

There are numerous theme parks within the Disney complex. It would take a week and cost a small fortune to visit all of them. I figured if I wanted to see the kids' stuff I'd visit the real Disneyland in California, so we visited Epcot Center, the park that highlights science and international cooperation. A day pass there cost \$31.02, plus tax (which I suppose brings it to some convenient amount), and it was surprisingly well worth it. **[It's probably double that today, but still probably more worth its price than a lot of admissions.]**

Epcot (Disney's "Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow") reminded me of the world's fair in Vancouver.. **[Basically that's what it is—a permanent world's fair.]** There's museums, films, and rides that introduce you to all the wonders of modern technology and more museums, films, and rides that take you on a grand tour of the world. There's also food stands and gift shops around every turn to take whatever's left of your money.

In the science area we saw pavilions entitled Energy, Horizons, Discovery, Wonders of Life, Imagination, Land, Motion, and Spaceship Earth (which is that big geodesic dome you see in all the pictures of Epcot). It sounds bad to say it, but they're all pretty much alike. The typical pavilion has a small museum area that gives superficial information about its topic. Then there's a high tech film show, and then there's the ride. Every building has some sort of train or boat that takes you on a journey through all the wonders it highlights. I'd never been to any sort of theme park before, so the rides were interesting. They are all pretty much alike, though. The most interesting ones were probably Imagination (where they highlighted inventors, authors, and artists), Spaceship Earth (where they gave you a roller-coaster ride through the history of communications), and Land (where a boat ride takes you through various environments of the earth and ends up at their experimental indoor farm, where they use hydroponics to grow vegetables for the Disney World restaurants. I could write paragraph after paragraph about the wonders of each particular pavilion (like I did after the world's fair), but you get the idea.



Spaceship Earth – Epcot Center

We also visited the World Showcase, where there's a big circular walkway dotted with pavilions of many lands. The pavilions are designed to reflect the architecture of their countries (a Mexican pyramid, a Chinese pagoda, an Italian town square), yet they fit together remarkably well. These have more detailed museums, as well as extensive souvenir stores (the Japanese pavilion literally had a full-size department store). There were also restaurants and cafes offering local cuisine. We had beer in the German beer garden, green tea flavored ice cream in a Japanese outdoor café, and Scandinavian pastries from an outdoor vendor near the Norway pavilion. We at least poked our heads into every pavilion (I haven't yet mentioned Morocco, France, the U.K., Canada, or the U.S.A.), and we saw films or went on rides in many of them.

Again the wheelchair helped. Most of the attractions have long lines that the majority of tourists have to swelter in. Almost always, though, there's a handicapped entrance with a much shorter line that is usually indoors. A few of the rides can only take one or two handicapped passengers at a time, but most let them on with everyone else. I'd bet we saved at least a couple of hours (and hence were able to see all we wanted to see) by using those handicapped entrances. **[I still feel somewhat guilty about that, but it's not as if Sandra could have walked all over the place.]**

We had dinner in the Land pavilion, where they have something akin to a mall food court, with "healthful foods from the land"—mostly soups, salads, breads, and the like. After this late dinner, it was nearly time for the park to close. They finish things off with a big light show called "IllumiNations", so named because all the international pavilions are outlined in Christmas lights. There's fireworks and assorted laser light displays, and the whole thing is really quite fun. They also sell chemical-filled necklaces and headbands that glow in the dark in neon colors and little flashlights with strings that shoot out of them like beams of light. Sucker that I am, of course I bought these, and I still have fun playing with my toys.

After Epcot closed we got on the monorail and rode around the park for a while. Technically you're supposed to pay \$2 a ride to use the monorail unless you're staying in one of the Disney hotels, but after hours no one cares. We rode to the end of one line, turned around, and rode back to the parking lot. It was no great thrill (especially since after dark you can't see much of anything), but now I can at least say I've done it.

As we were driving out of Disney World, they were doing their light show in the nearby Disney/MGM Studios theme park. It's mostly fireworks rather than lasers, and it really lit up the sky as we drove to the exit. The added bonus was that we didn't have to pay anything to see it.

The maze of Disney World freeways dump out onto U.S. 192, which is the town of Kissimmee. There might have been a nice little town here at some point. Today there's an unending strip of motels, convenience stores, fast food, T-shirt outlets, sports card shops, antique dealers, and second-rate tourist attractions. Kissimmee has two reasons for existence. First and foremost is Disney. Second, it is the center of the spring training camps for major league baseball. All but six of the major league teams have camps within fifty miles of Kissimmee, many of them centered right around the big "Baseball City" complex right in town. In the off-season (i.e., summer), there are a host of minor league teams that fill the same parks. **[While my former student Brad Nelson never played there, the Brewers have since moved their A-ball team to central Florida.]**

The highway in Kissimmee is strange. There's pretty much no streets south of highway 192. The whole town is north of it. At every traffic light (and there are hundreds of them—almost literally), the right lane (eastbound) is always solid green. The left lane changes with traffic, and there's always a left turn lane for people who want to go into town. It's weird, but once you figure it out it really does keep traffic moving efficiently.

Sandra had booked us into a place called the Budget Inn. After driving a while along highway 192, we saw a pleasant-looking place with that name and pulled in. They had no vacancy, and they said they knew nothing about our reservation, but they did tell us there was another Budget Inn further into town. Eventually we came to the other location and stopped. The office was dark, but when we rang an Asian woman who didn't speak English well came to the window. She did have a record of our reservation, but she said that all they had left was a single room instead of the double we had requested. (Sandra and I may be friends, but that degree of intimacy was certainly not appropriate when she was engaged to be married shortly after.) It was very late, but Sandra had guaranteed the reservation with her credit card, so something was obviously wrong. We argued for some time about it, but the woman conveniently didn't understand anything we wanted to talk about. Eventually we just gave up and left. (At least the motel never showed up on Sandra's credit card bill.)

We eventually found a Day's Inn, and we got their last double room. **[The place was really kind of strange. It was really two different Days Inns that were across the street from each other. There was technically no vacancy at the one where we stopped, but they were able to arrange a room for us at the one across the street.]** It was after midnight at this point, but I was hungry. Almost everything around seemed to be closed (which seemed off shortly after closing time at a main tourist attraction), but I did find a nearby convenience store where I got some juice and an ice cream bar. I went back to the motel, read the local paper for a while, and eventually went to sleep.

THURSDAY, April 23

While we got up relatively late, it was still a very short night. The motel offered a continental breakfast, so I brought the doughnuts, coffee, and juice up to the room. Sandra was looking for tacky T-shirts for some friends of hers, so we stopped at a couple of huge souvenir emporiums (or is it "emporia") to look around. Eventually we made our way into Orlando proper.

We spent most of the day today at Universal Studios, the main theme park in the city of Orlando and the second largest attraction in the area. Owned by MCA (the same company that owns Metromail in Mt. Pleasant and most of the farmland in Mississippi), Universal Studios is—of course—based in Hollywood. (Actually it's in Universal City, but who's counting?) **[Having since been there, I've learned there really are two "Hollywoods". The first, which is really just a concept, includes all of Southern California. The second is a somewhat seedy district in central Los Angeles—and Universal City really is nowhere near it.]** They opened the theme park in Orlando to take advantage of the East Coast tourist traffic, and they do just enough filming here that everybody can say that they "just missed" seeing a famous movie star. With Sandra's AAA discount, the passes at Universal were about \$20 each, and again it didn't seem horribly overpriced. (The nice thing about these theme parks is that once you're in, you don't



Yogi Bear greets Sandra at Universal Studios

have to pay again, except for food and souvenirs. **[It is better than, say, going to the state fair, where you pay an admission and then pay again every time you turn around.]**

Universal also made concessions for the handicapped, but they weren't as good as Disney. All they had were basic wheelchairs—not the ones with the leg lift, which was really what Sandra needed. Also, even their handicapped parking was not particularly close, and you couldn't take a wheelchair out to the lot. We got by, though, and eventually Yogi Bear shook our hand and we were in.

It was hard to imagine what a theme park with a Hollywood theme would be, but it was fun. The buildings are all designed to be back lot sets. You see little bits of old New York, Paris, and San Francisco, plus such instantly recognizable features as the Bates Motel in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. As in real movies, the bulk of the buildings are just sets—they have nothing at all behind the walls. A few have stuff for sale. For instance, we had cheesecake and espresso at a little café in Paris. Others are named after famous films, and they feature rides based on those movies. I'll go through those in my own order of preference.

My favorite attraction was "Earthquake". In this pavilion, the crowd is first treated to a demonstration of special effects in movie making (which is interesting, but really just provides a place to wait so the line outside doesn't become too long). Inside they put you in a subway car for a ride from one station to another. Everything begins like a real subway ride, but when you get to the other station,

the earthquake starts. The car shakes, the station self-destructs and catches fire, and a semi truck comes crashing through the ceiling from a street above. The thing that amazes me is that this disaster keeps re-occurring several times each hour, and yet when you first get into the station everything looks neat, tidy, and in perfect shape. They must have more asbestos in that subway station than in our entire school. I loved the "Earthquake" exhibit; on a scale of 1 – 10, I'd give it a "9".

[I assume this is supposed to be modeled on either the Los Angeles metro or BART in San Francisco, since you don't think of earthquakes in places like New York. If it is, it's not realistic, though, as the subways in California are both heavily reinforced and designed to flex with seismic waves to prevent precisely this type of problem. Both the Bay Area and L.A. have had major earthquakes since their transit systems went in, and they found after both Loma Prieta and Northridge that while the freeways crumbled, the subways stayed perfectly intact. From the point of view of the movie-makers, though, having the disaster in an enclosed underground environment does make for better entertainment.]

I also liked "King Kong", and I'd also give it a "9". The waiting area is nothing special (get your picture taken with the ape), and fortunately handicapped tourists avoid most of it. The ride is fun, though. You get into an aerial tramway, with cars hanging from a wire mechanism. The ride takes you through the skyline of New York. Partway through a special TV pops out, with an announcer giving details on the spotting of King Kong. The ape's big paw comes charging at the car and jostles it around a bit—nothing really scary, but fun. The ride got stuck while we were on it, so they took us around again for free. **[I'll mention on the side that years after this a former student of mine, Bob Brandenburg, worked as an intern on the re-make of the *King Kong* movie. I frankly found the new movie boring, and it intrigued me that very little of it was set in New York.]**

Also enjoyable was Nickelodeon Studios, home of the children's cable TV network. This is an actual working cable network, and it's about the only thing that's real at Universal Studios/Florida. The line was incredible (with "45 minute wait at his point" signs well into the sea of people), but with the wheelchair we sneaked in the back door without much of a wait. Nickelodeon is designed for kids, and the tour was heavy on the mysteries of "gak" and "green slime", but it was nonetheless fun. It ends up on the set of a children's game show, where they apparently test out ideas that will eventually appear on the actual show. They pick kids from the audience, and they obviously have loads of fun doing the stupid stunts they are asked to do. Overall, I'd give Nick an "8".

The rest of the stuff wasn't so great. Hanna-Barbera had an incredibly high tech ride where you sat in a Jetson-mobile and got pummeled around as you watched the Flintstones and Jetsons save the world on a big screen at the front of the room. It didn't have much of a point, and it moved too much for my taste. I'd have preferred learning about the secrets of animation. (Overall rating—"5")

I was also not much of a fan of “Back to the Future”, which was the newest and apparently biggest attraction in the park. Even the handicaps had to wait for this one, and it really wasn’t worth it. I liked the movie (at least the original, if not the sequels), but this attraction wasn’t much. You get into the time-mobile and rocket through a stomach-turning ride as 3-D scenery came crashing at you from the screen. I suppose it must be for the younger set, but I was underwhelmed, and I give it a “3”.

We thought about having lunch at the Hard Rock Café, which is adjacent to Universal. We had both enjoyed the Hard Rock in New Orleans, and it seemed an appropriate place to stop in Orlando. Unfortunately the line was incredible. I did wade through a lesser line to visit the souvenir shop and pick up the requisite shirt, but there was no way I’d have made my flight home if we had bothered with lunch. **[Something I’ve always liked about the New Orleans Hard Rock is that it’s easy to get into. In many other places they seem to have perennial lines.]**

We drove across Orlando relatively quickly and made it out to the airport. I got my stuff, and Sandra took the wheel (for the first time since her surgery) and was off. I checked in quickly and had tons of time to kill, so I strolled from store to store in the airport mall, finding nothing I really wanted to buy—especially at airport prices. The big event was going to the restroom and changing from my shorts back into clothes that were appropriate for spring up north. Eventually I got on the train and went off to the gates at Terminal B.

The flight to Minneapolis was uneventful. I had lots and lots of time to kill in the Cities, which was probably good, since I had to go from Gate 3 to Gate 97-A, which does indeed mean the entire length of the airport. (Actually it’s even more than that. Flights to places like Mason City, which can’t go up to the regular gates, have their own special annex, which you have to go through a little tunnel to get to.) **[They’ve since re-designed the airport, and while the “airlink” flights are still far out of the way, it’s quite a bit easier to get there than it used to be.]** I ate my way through the airport, stopping at about three different places en route to my gate. I was amused that they have brochures called “A Gourmet’s Guide to MSP Airport” available all over the place. There’s nothing that’s really gourmet food here, but it is nice to have a directory.

I had tons of time to kill even after I got to the gate, so I started making out the notes that I eventually used to write this travelogue. Finally they called my flight (for Mason City, with continuing service to Ft. Dodge and Sioux City), and I walked outside to board.

The plane was surprisingly large. We flew on an SF-340—which has two seats, an aisle, and then one more seat in each row (lettered A, B, and F). To me, that would make the weight unbalanced, but the plane did seem to make it off the ground okay. We even had a flight attendant on this big plane. She served drinks and nuts, and she even had time to refill the drinks on the short hop down to Iowa. **[The plane was “big” compared to the 19-seater I’d flown from Moline to Chicago on. It is the smallest plane in Northwest’s fleet, and no one is ever going to confuse it with a 747. For connecting minor airports to a hub, though, this 30-seat prop jet really works quite well. Northwest has since revised the schedule so that Sioux City passengers no longer need to make two stops to get to MSP. Mason City and Fort Dodge are still linked together, though. The two airports are equidistant from me, but it’s certainly easier to do a direct flight from Mason City than leaving from Fort Dodge and stopping en route.]**



SF-340 bound for Mason City

I found out on landing in Mason City why there’s such a problem for planes coming in there in fog. I had been past the Mason City airport numerous times and seen all the lights along the highway, but I never really gave any thought to what happened when planes landed there. Almost every flight into Mason City comes in from the north (i.e. Minneapolis). To land in Mason City they have to make a 180° turn and then cross highway 18 to land facing north on a runway that begins right next to the four-lane highway. It was extremely cloudy as we landed, but when we broke through the clouds, there was that sea of lights directing us to the runway (and, more to the point, seeing to it that we didn’t land on highway 18 by mistake). In fog, though, that’s a really complicated maneuver to try to perform—especially for the inexperienced pilots who fly routes like this.

Our pilot told us that it was 40 degrees and drizzly in Mason City, much the same as when I had left. I was well tanned and full of sunshine as I walked into the terminal, and I quickly grabbed my gym bag (which was full enough to be checked this time). I headed out to the parking lot, got in my car (which started right up with no problems), and was off. I stopped for coffee at the McDonalds in Clear Lake (noticing that the prices were substantially less than in Florida **[no longer true—since Iowa raised its minimum wage, fast food here is substantially higher than many other places]**) and then cruised on westward toward home.

IN GENERAL

Well, here’s the same questions I asked at the end of my travelogues for such places as Spain and Russia. We’ll see if they apply to a “foreign” place like Florida.

Did you like Florida? Well, I've yet to travel to a place I didn't like—but then I've got a kind of a Will Rogers attitude about that. I'd never want to live in Florida (which is probably a guarantee that someday I will **[God, I hope not!]**), but it was a fun place to see. It's totally different from the Midwest, and yet the people who live there seem remarkably down-to-earth, much like the people here **[which makes sense, since a remarkable amount of them used to live here]**. I like to complain about things, and I'll certainly join everybody in complaining about Midwestern winters. (I didn't like it when my car didn't want to start at Margaret's over Christmas), but I don't think I'd be happy in year-round heat either. If you take it for what it is, though, Florida is fun for tourists. It knows how to deal with them, and it does a good job. This made a fun vacation, and it was a good escape from the rat-race of the school year.

How did it compare with other places you have visited? That depends on what you mean. The only other vacation I've been on that had developed tourist attractions like Disney World was the World's Fair trip in '86. That trip wins, hands down—since it also included the natural beauty of the mountains at Jasper and the secluded rocky beaches at Pacific Rim. You don't go to Florida for natural beauty, though—at least you don't these days. Florida knows how to dish out fun, though (right down to the topless truck stops along the interstate), and they do it very well. Every trip I've taken has stood out in different ways, and this was certainly up there with the rest of them.

What did you like least? If you haven't figured it out by now, you haven't read the travelogue. I didn't like all the suburban sprawl that is modern-day Florida. I don't care for that in Minneapolis or West Des Moines **[which has really exploded and become much more like Florida in recent years]**, and in Florida it's in epidemic proportions. I really wonder about the social identity of cities where there is no real city—where the mall really is the center of community life. I worry about children who grow up without a basketball hoop in the driveway or a yard with a sandbox in it. I'd really like to go back and see this mess in twenty years—to see whether all those condos really are utopia or whether they become the slums of the future.

What are Floridian people like? (as in “What are Soviet people or Spanish people or Moroccan people like?”) Well, first off, you need to realize that there's pretty much no such thing as a Floridian. Sandra would probably be flattered to hear that she's one of the strangest people I know, and she's probably lived in Florida longer than just about anyone else, but she's actually a Midwesterner (would you believe a preacher's family from Illinois' Little Egypt?). Everyone in Florida is from somewhere else—be in New York or Michigan (who is winning the Rose Bowl as I write this—hail to the victors valiant) or Cuba. I imagine Mt. Pleasant today must be a lot like Florida, with all the people who have moved there with the new factories. It lacks much of a sense of roots, and that's bothersome. Still, the people are much more polite and helpful than I expected to find in such a heavily touristed place, and they seem to be happy and optimistic. I had a long, interesting discussion with a checker at Target when her cash register had some problem and we were waiting for a supervisor to fix it. She had moved to Gainesville from Washington, D.C., and she said Florida was a much better place to raise her boys. Florida has a lot of the same problems that plague every heavily-populated place, but the people really do seem to want to make it a good place to live.

How was your Floridian? (as in “How was your Spanish?” or “How was your French?") The thing to remember here is that the southernmost state in Dixie really isn't a part of the South. **[Actually it both is and isn't.]** Because everyone seems to be from New Jersey, there's not any particular accent in the speech. Central Florida does have a few minorities (Hispanic and Asian, with a few Blacks), but it's nothing like visiting Texas or Mississippi. My Illinois/Michigan/Iowa accent worked just fine, thank-you.

What will you remember most from the trip? Probably all the little problems that made it such an interesting trip. I do apologize to Sandra (and to Kristine and Tony) for visiting at such an awkward time. Unfortunately, that's what you get with non-refundable tickets. If I had to pick something more specific, though, I suppose I'd say the “Earthquake” attraction at Universal Studios. It was interesting and fun—one of the most enjoyable experiences I've had on a vacation.

This was a bizarre trip, but it was also a lot of fun. My credit limit was challenged (Florida is **not** in any way cheap), but it was well worth it. I had not had an enjoyable spring at school, and the classic spring break made a nice getaway. Perhaps it was missing the thong bikinis and the rest of the “action”, but that's missing most of the time for me. I had fun in Florida, and I'm definitely glad I went. Thanks for the hospitality, Sandra.