

QUIZ BOWL IN ST. LOUIS

2003

[UPDATE: January, 2010—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.]



**The Golden Bear quiz bowl team
National Academic Championships – St. Louis, Missouri**

nationals nearly a decade ago. [I've probably had stronger teams since then, but this was definitely not a bad group.] To introduce them, I'll go through the biographies they wrote up to be read during breaks in the competition games:

- Jeff Hellman, Senior
 - 2-time state cross-country qualifier
 - All-state honoree in group speech, math, and academics
 - In drama, had an alter ego as a Jewish dairyman named Tevye
- John Kohlhaas (pron. = KOLE-house), Junior (Captain)
 - Participated in state cross-country and track
 - Earned national honors in math and all-state honors in speech
 - Intramural basketball champion
- Mike Blocker, Senior
 - Works with sound and light crew for plays and concerts
 - Active in martial arts and rollerblading
 - Enjoys sword collecting and reading
- David Murphy, Senior
 - All-state honoree in speech
 - Enjoys cross-country, drama, and math team, and playing hacky-sack
 - Received key to city for saving a woman from a burning building
- Steven Kellner, Senior (Alternate)
 - Traveled to Europe as part of the Iowa Music Ambassadors
 - Received statewide honors in speech, music, and math
 - Proud to work at one of the eleven remaining K-Mart stores in Iowa
- Matt Courtney, Sophomore (Alternate)
 - Varsity athlete in basketball and cross-country as a sophomore
 - Active in student council, track, math team, and band
 - Fluent juggler who enjoys making his own root beer
- Coach: David Burrow
- Group qualified by winning the Little Dutch Invitational in Orange City, Iowa

[None of the hosts for our games believed the tidbit about David saving a woman from a burning building, but that really was true.]

I hesitated for quite a while before writing this travelogue. Really, it didn't seem as if there was much to write about. Most of our previous quiz bowl adventures were major trips, jaunts halfway across a continent with lots of sightseeing thrown in. This by comparison was not much more than a glorified weekend getaway. The 2003 national tournament was in St. Louis, by far the closest place it had ever been. We could easily drive there in one day, instead of needing to make a stop en route. There's also not a great deal of touristic interest in St. Louis, which in some ways was good, since that would mean the real point of the trip would be the competition.

The team we were taking to nationals this year was one of the best I have ever had. It's really not at all hard to qualify for nationals, and some years we've taken teams that honestly didn't deserve to be there. This year, though, we had a team that could be competitive against the best. It was probably the second-strongest I've ever had, after the very first group I took to

I'll try to avoid mentioning any specific kids by name elsewhere in this travelogue, but that was the group. In addition to being a very bright bunch of kids, this was also a fun group with which to travel. Unlike some years where I felt like little more than a chauffer, this year I felt they wanted me to be part of the group. Everything came together for a most enjoyable trip.

THURSDAY, JUNE 10 ALGONA, IOWA TO O'FALLON, ILLINOIS

Last year we waited **forever** before everyone showed and we could leave for nationals. This year there were no delays at all. In fact, the person who was latest last year was waiting in the parking lot when I got out to school about 20 minutes before we were scheduled to leave. Everybody else showed up promptly, too, and we left right on schedule—a much better start than last year.

It was especially nice this year that with a smaller group and a shorter trip we could all go in just one school suburban. **[I believe that's the ONLY time we've made a trip in one vehicle. The way the school's travel rules are written these days, it would be all but impossible to do so again.]** It was good to have everyone together—I think it made us more of a team—and it was nice not to have to worry about always having to keep up with another vehicle or pick a place to meet up.

A couple of the kids read or listened to music on headphones as we drove along, but most of them rapidly started dozing off. With everyone off in their own little world, it was an extremely silent trip. Fortunately I was wide awake myself, or I could have been lulled into unconsciousness too. Instead I just watched the countryside go by and pondered how much prettier everything was now that the crops were up—so much nicer than even a couple weeks ago.



Getting ready to leave – BGHS, Algona, Iowa

There were several places we might have stopped for a morning break. Having recalled last year, when everyone seemed to constantly have to use the restroom, my original plan was to stop in Nashua, about an hour and a half from home. It seemed silly to wake people when most were asleep, though, so I drove on. I also bypassed possible stops in Waverly, Janesville, and Waterloo before coming to the no-mans land of I-380 (almost no businesses for 50 miles) that leads south to Cedar Rapids.

By the time we reached Cedar Rapids (3½ hours from home) I had to stop, both to use the restroom and just to stretch. Most of the kids were still asleep, but they woke up without complaints as we exited onto Blairs Ferry Road. I pulled into a Quik Trip convenience store just off the interstate, where we had a nice little break. Here again things moved much more efficiently than last year. Even though there was just one restroom in the place, the whole group managed to do their business and pick up whatever snacks they wanted in not much more than ten minutes. **[A big difference this year was that this was an all-male group, as compared with last year when we had both boys and girls. With no offense at all meant to the ladies, boys tend to do things quicker when they travel.]**

Quik Trip had a display of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and almost all the kids went wild over them. Had I known that was what they wanted for snacks, I'd have gone a block further west, where the actual Krispy Kreme shop is located. (They would have had a larger restroom, too.) Then they could have had hot, fresh doughnuts, instead of those that had been waiting around in the display case. They seemed to go for the cold ones, though; we must have downed a couple dozen among the group. **[The Kirspsy Kreme in Cedar Rapids has since shut down; its location is now a Taco Bell. The whole Krispy Kreme chain seems to be down-sizing.]**

We drove south through C.R. and on to Coralville, where we picked up Interstate 80. I think I-80 east of Iowa City is one of the prettiest interstates anywhere. Those who think Iowa is nothing but flat farmland should make that drive through the forested hills by West Branch and Durant. We took the 280 beltway around the Quad Cities and before long crossed the Mississippi on that lovely gold bridge I remember them erecting when I was a child.

Just inside Illinois we saw the first of many construction zones. Every time there's construction on the interstate, Illinois begins the work zone with one of these two signs featuring a fluorescent green scrawl on a black background:

Please slow down
My mommy works here.
Love, Bobby

Please slow down
My daddy works here.
Love, Abbi

Bobby and Abbi's parents must work literally everywhere—either that or there's lots and lots of kids named Bobby and Abbi who have parents working construction. This summer Illinois seems to be repairing virtually every interstate bridge in the state, and the kids got to laughing each time they saw yet another Bobby or Abbi sign. I don't think those signs actually slow anyone down. What does are the ones that say "CAMERA ENFORCED RADAR" or "MINIMUM FINE \$250 – 578 TICKETS ISSUED TO DATE". The work zone signs in Illinois advise 45 mph "when workers present", and that's exactly what the locals drive when people are working. When they aren't, traffic flies by at 70 as if there weren't any barricades at the side.

We followed I-74 down to Galesburg, where we stopped for lunch. After driving down the strip by Carl Sandburg Mall, the kids decided on Fazoli's, the Italian fast food chain. For those who eat in, Fazoli's always offers complementary bread sticks with the meal. An employee makes the rounds of the dining room, offering those tasty garlic and Parmesan morsels that are probably about as nutritious as deep-fried butter sticks. At most Fazoli's I've been to that employee is either a high school kid or an old man like the ones who shove carts at you when you walk into Wal-Mart. Here the employee seemed to fit right into the atmosphere. She was an elderly lady in a head scarf who came across as a stereotype of an Italian grandmother. She had a thick Mediterranean accent, and while she never actually said it, I kept expecting to hear the words "eat, eat!" coming out of her mouth. She certainly saw to it that we did eat. Before we could finish one bread stick, she would plop another down in front of us—and there was no way she was taking "no, thank-you" for an answer.

[Probably as a cost-saving measure, Fazoli's has discontinued the breadstick people. You can still get free breadsticks, but you have to go back to the counter each time you want more. I'm sure this encourages people to take less, and it also allows them to get by with less staff. From my point of view, it also makes the place less attractive to eat at.]

Entertaining as she was, the woman definitely made it clear that this was a business. One of the students had ordered a dish that came with alfredo sauce. When the woman asked if there was anything she could get us, the kid asked if he could get some marinara to go with his dish. "Oh, of course," she bubbled, "anything you want." Then she abruptly added with an almost snotty tone, "forty-two cents." The bread sticks may be free, but apparently extra sauces come at a premium. She brought the sauce, and the student paid in exact change. Afterwards I joked that he should have been considerate and left the lady a 6¢ tip—the proper 15%.

We got back on I-74 and headed southeast to Peoria. We went around that city on the beltway and soon after exited onto Interstate 155, a highway to nowhere that basically exists so traffic from Peoria won't have to go out of its way to get down to Springfield. **[I read not long ago that Illinois has more miles of interstate per capita than any other state in America—which is especially impressive since it's not at all a small state. Several major interstates criss-cross the state, and there are lesser freeways connecting absolutely everywhere of any size at all. They've definitely gotten their share of federal highway funds.]** We dodged construction south to Lincoln and then headed southward on I-55 through Springfield and on to Litchfield.

We bought gas in Litchfield. One of the brands advertised at the exit was "Murphy USA", and since one of our students was named Murphy, that seemed an amusing choice. We drove and drove and drove, following a series of signs for "Murphy USA". After almost three miles, we came to a Wal-Mart store. It turned out that "Murphy" was the gas bar in front of Wal-Mart. It was jam-packed, and would obviously require quite a wait. Moreover, since one of our team members was a devoted K-Mart employee, he really didn't want us patronizing the enemy. (Never mind that gas is usually a loss-leader in places like that; we'd probably have ended up costing them money.) So we went all the way back to the exit and stopped at a Shell station. It was 2¢ more per gallon, but there was no wait and it wasn't Wal-Mart. Unfortunately when I put the school credit card in the pump, it said "SEE ATTENDANT". I remembered last year, when the school card had gotten maxed out from a damage deposit a hotel had placed on it during CYO baseball—which happened to be at the same time as our quiz bowl trip. I really didn't want to put all the gas from this trip on my credit card, but I sighed and figured I could if I had to. I asked the woman inside to re-set the pump. She did, and I filled the tank to the tune of nearly \$50. Inside, I gave her the school credit card again, and it went through without incident. I guess they just had some problem with the card reader on the pump.

It was mid-afternoon when we reached greater St. Louis, still before rush hour, and we made it through the area swiftly. We followed I-55 past one string of suburbs, turned southward on I-255, and then followed I-64 back east past another string of suburbs. Traffic moved right along, even though all of these interstates were obviously designed for a time when this was a rural, rather than a suburban area. They're just four lanes, two in each direction, past major malls and office parks. I never did see them at rush hour, and I'm glad. Just about the worst congestion I've ever been in was on the Missouri side of St. Louis, and from the looks of things at rush hour the Illinois side wouldn't be much better. **[I've been in traffic jams in St. Louis on several occasions; it's one of the worst places anywhere to drive.]**

St. Louis is one of the most spread-out suburban areas anywhere. The city itself is quite small—about 300,000 people **[though early in the last century it was nearly three-fourths of a million]**—but over two million live in the surrounding sprawl. It's 60 miles from Wentzville in the west to Troy in the east, and things stretch out about the same north to south along the river. If ever there were a city that was dominated by its suburbs, it's St. Louis.

Our home for the next three days would be a pleasant motel on one of those endless strips, the Sleep Inn in O'Fallon, Illinois. The Choice Hotels guidebook cautions that this should not be confused with the Sleep Inn in O'Fallon, Missouri, a larger and nicer suburb about fifty miles west of here. Who O'Fallon may have been, I have no clue, but his name is everywhere around here. The kids obviously liked the motel a lot, which I was glad about. I had chosen it mostly because it was cheap (at least by city standards), but I figured that like all in its chain it would be new or nicely kept up. It was also nice to be in a suburban location, close to fast food and the like. **[The main alternative would have been to stay at the hotel where the event was happening, an elegant old hotel in downtown St. Louis. Staying downtown would have been easier from a transportation point of view, but it would have been very awkward to find things to do or places to eat at night.]**

We took just a few minutes to settle in, and then it was time to go into the city proper. We spent almost fifteen minutes going about 3½ miles along seedy old strips until we came to the Swansea park-and-ride for the Metrolink train system. I had purchased Metrolink day passes for the group on the internet before we left, so we just locked up the suburban and made our way to the platform. There was a sign at the entrance to the platform that implied that there could be service disruptions today, but an old man in a uniform assured us that a train would be coming. An announcement said there was a “bus bridge” operating between the Memorial Hospital and Belleville stations (which was where Swansea was located), but the man told us we should ignore that; a train would be here shortly.

No train came, nor did any bus. We waited ... and waited ... and waited. Several people came onto the platform and then left again, and pretty much everyone seemed confused. Eventually two well-dressed men who said they worked for Metrolink drove up in a car and an SUV and offered to shuttle people to a station where they could catch their train. I told the man I'd be happy to drive myself, but I had no clue where the next station was. He agreed to lead me, so the kids piled into the suburban and we set off on a series of residential two-lane streets that seemed to go nowhere. Eventually we made it to state highway 161, and shortly after that to the Memorial Hospital station. I had no clue how we gotten there, and I couldn't have traced my way back for anything. At least we were there, though.



Waiting on a Metrolink platform

It turned out that earlier this week some extremely severe storms had hit southwest Illinois. Lightning had knocked out a transformer near Swansea, and flooding had washed out a section of track by Belleville. Metrolink's damages were actually small compared to much of the area. Hundreds of thousands of homes had lost power, and several thousand were still blacked out two days later.

Trains were running at Memorial Hospital station, and before long we boarded one and headed westward toward St. Louis. Metrolink in St. Louis (not to be confused with the Los Angeles commuter system of the same name) is one of the newest urban train systems in America. The Missouri part of the line is a little over a decade old, and the Illinois portion opened after the millennium. Everything still looks new, and the kids remarked at how smooth the trip was. The Illinois stretch of the line is exactly what modern-day urban transit should be. The stations are far apart (basically one per suburb), so the train can run full speed and doesn't have to stop constantly. Trains run as frequently as a city subway, though—every 10 minutes or so all day long. All the stations have large park-and-ride lots, and local buses connect them with points throughout the 'burbs. The stations are much closer on the Missouri side. In the city, even though it only has one line, Metrolink does a remarkably good job of getting people where they want to go. It serves downtown, all the various sports complexes in a sports-crazy town, the city's major museums and tourist attractions, numerous

industrial areas, three major universities, two casinos, and the airport. They're building a second line to the southwest Missouri suburbs, and several other routes for future expansion are in the planning stages.

Metrolink is by far the most successful of the transit systems that opened in the Clinton era. It has consistently surpassed ridership estimates and seems to do a remarkably good job of actually getting people out of their cars. An added bonus is that the stations have become the focus for redevelopment as both inner city and old suburban areas look to re-invent themselves.

[I had been to St. Louis on my own a couple of times before this trip, so I was familiar with Metrolink, which really is one of the best light rail systems anywhere. They've since finished the "cross-county" line in southwest St. Louis, and its completion has changed the schedule throughout the system. Now trains from Illinois run only every 15 – 20 minutes (except at rush hour), That's actually more appropriate; the service they had before was almost too frequent.]

Much of the train ride through Illinois really looks quite rural. While suburbs line the highways all along here, much of the train route is through cornfields and forest. That semi-rural area ends abruptly, though, at Jackie Joyner-Kersey station. "JJK", as the drivers call it, marks the east end of East St. Louis and the start of dense urban development. The station was named after a recreation center that looks remarkably like Algona's YMCA. Presumably it was donated by the athlete whose name it bears, who presumably was originally from East St. Louis. **[It was, and she was.]** I suppose it must be possible to get to the JJK Center by car, but virtually everyone who uses it seems to come by train.

In the not too distant past East St. Louis was the poorest city in America. I remember back in the Reagan era seeing shows like *60 Minutes* with documentaries on the pathetic lives of its residents, and I've also seen the place on *Cops* and similar "reality" shows. I gather "ESL" (as local signs invariably call it) was never exactly a nice city, but it went steadily downhill through most of the second half of the 20th Century. Everyone who could afford to leave moved on to places like O'Fallon and Swansea, leaving a population of unemployed and often virtually unemployable people barely getting by on public assistance. The old smokestack factories where generations of European immigrants used to work closed down (often leaving toxic waste dumps on their grounds), and block after block of empty rowhouses were left to decay into shells. The TV shots from here were similar to those we used to see of the South Bronx.

Twenty years later, it's still not like anyone's going to confuse East St. Louis with Chicago's North Shore. Pretty much no one who wasn't born there would choose to live in East St. Louis. That said, the place was certainly nothing like its old TV image. Much of ESL looks like what you see along the green line on Chicago's South Side—that is, it's basically empty lots. It's weird to see one or two units of what used to be a string of row houses along a street, but that's what you see—everything else has been torn down. As in Chicago, they've found that by tearing down vacant buildings, they cut down substantially on crime. The empty buildings don't become crack houses or places of prostitution, and with all the open area there are a lot fewer places for the bad guys to hide when they are running from the police. I'd imagine the space, even if it's far from nicely landscaped, makes things more pleasant for the folks that remain in the neighborhood, too.

There's a lot of brand new housing in East St. Louis, too. I'm sure it's essentially public housing (much of it bears signs for "Illinois First", the massive public works project former Governor Ryan pushed through) though they're probably trying to get a mix of income levels. Like the new development in Chicago, everything is low-rise. There are modern rowhouses and duplexes and even a few detached houses.

What you don't see in ESL is much in the way of business. There are a few neighborhood liquor stores and check cashing services, but I don't think I saw a supermarket or even a convenience store anywhere—let alone anywhere to buy dry goods. I think I saw one fast food place (a Church's fried chicken stand), and nothing in the way of "real" restaurants. In Chicago you see Jewell and Walgreens and McDonalds in even the worst neighborhoods, and you're never far from K-Mart or 7-11. I would think those same businesses could make a go of it here, but they don't. I saw lots of people lugging groceries on the train, presumably from somewhere in the suburbs. **[Walgreen's has since made a big push into ESL, but not a lot of other businesses seem to have followed.]**

The biggest business by far in East St. Louis is the Casino Queen, which apparently tops the arch as the St. Louis area's biggest tourist attraction. The concept of gambling on a riverboat that doesn't actually ever leave the dock seems a bit bizarre to me, but then gambling has never been one of my vices. I'd bet most of the people who go there (and the parking lot can accommodate thousands—not to mention those who come by train) never bother looking at the water anyway. **[Reading over this, it does amuse me that I chose to use the phrase "I bet" in reference to a casino.]**

... Not that the Mississippi is exactly beautiful at St. Louis. There are places where the Father of Waters is breathtaking. There are few places I find more lovely than Effigy Mounds, just east of Decorah, and the whole stretch from Dubuque up to the Twin Cities is really nice. There are places in the South where, if not gorgeous, the river is at least stately and grand. At St. Louis, though, it's brown and industrial. It's the sort of thing that makes you want to drink bottled water as you ponder the fact that the wastewater from a dozen states flows through it. (Of course the municipal water systems on both sides of the river produce perfectly pure tap water—which is precisely what most bottled water is anyway.) There's a little bit of parkland on the Missouri side of the river, but the Illinois side is basically one big industrial port. The bridges are ugly and decrepit (the one Metrolink runs over was apparently declared unsafe for cars), and about the only thing of scenic interest is the arch. **[There are some nice things in St. Louis, but on the whole it's one of the ugliest places in America.]**

We didn't have to look at the river too long, though. Shortly after crossing it, Metrolink plunges into the subway beneath downtown St. Louis. We went two more stops and got off at 8th and Pine, in the closest thing to a "financial district" the city has.

Frankly downtown St. Louis isn't much. Des Moines has a significantly more substantial downtown area than does St. Louis. I mentioned before that this is an incredibly suburban metro area; the city proper really just gets lost in the whole mess. Nothing has been torn down in St. Louis, but there's a lot of downtown that's boarded up and even more parking ramps than I could see any place having a need for. There are some offices and banks in downtown St. Louis, but it's certainly not a place anyone would go shopping. There is still one downtown department store (Famous-Barr, which was founded locally but is now owned by Macy's). **[An interesting tidbit is that this was apparently the first air-conditioned department store in the world. Since this trip, Macy's has downsized the downtown St. Louis store, and it wouldn't surprise me if they close it before long.]** The store would certainly never rival Marshall Field's, though, and there's nothing other than them to bring anyone downtown. Perhaps weirdest of all is the lack of selection in food. There were a few trendy bistros and coffee bars trying to gentrify the place, but there were almost no mass-market restaurants. I never did see a burger stand or a taco place or a doughnut shop, and the closest thing to a "family" restaurant we saw was TGI Friday's. That seemed a bit surprising, since downtown St. Louis gets more than its share of tourists. Lots of people go to the arch, and there are also three major sports venues flanking the area. You'd think someone would have the entrepreneurial spirit to milk money out of the visitors—but no.

Something that was hard to miss, both on Metrolink and walking around downtown, is that St. Louis has a very different ethnic mix than most other cities. Basically this city is black and white—period. The further away from the inner city you get, the whiter the neighborhoods get, though there are at least some blacks and some whites pretty much everywhere. I'd say the Illinois side of greater St. Louis is about 50/50 black and white (almost totally black in ESL and maybe $\frac{2}{3}$ — $\frac{1}{3}$ white/black elsewhere), the city proper is overwhelmingly black, and the Missouri suburbs are almost entirely white. What doesn't enter into that mix anywhere are Asians and Hispanics. The only Asian people I saw, though, were a handful of women working in Chinese restaurants, and I honestly don't think I ever saw a single Hispanic person. Having just come from Los Angeles and having made countless trips to Chicago, that was downright weird. I didn't necessarily expect the ethnic blend of L.A., but then again I can't go shopping in Mason City without running into Hispanic people.

We walked about six blocks to the other end of downtown. The most interesting feature we passed was a truly hideous fountain featuring a badly proportioned nude man **[supposedly an Olympic runner]** at its center. The water in the fountain was dyed red—or perhaps it was just untreated water from the polluted river. In any event, it was ugly. **[There was a major re-design of this area with the opening of the new Busch Stadium just a couple years after this trip.]**



Drury Plaza Hotel – downtown St. Louis
geared more to middle aged men than to teenaged boys.

Our destination was the Drury Plaza Hotel, one of several downtown hotels run by the Drury chain, which is headquartered in St. Louis. Drury mostly operates rather generic midrange suburban motels, but in their hometown they've chosen to buy up old luxury hotels and try to re-fit them for a more midrange market. This year's national quiz bowl tournament was being held in two ballrooms at the Drury Plaza. The sponsors had booked a decent room rate (\$80 per room per night, plus \$15 each day for parking, plus 14% tax), but it was well above what we could get out in the suburbs. I also kind of liked not having the kids together with everyone else at the tournament; it gave them fewer opportunities to get in trouble. What's more, while the Drury Plaza's lobby had lots of pretensions, my bet is its rooms were not a whole lot nicer than those at the Sleep Inn—and they may well have been older and dingier. The kids said that they really preferred staying out in the suburbs—and I don't think they were humoring me when they said it. From a kid's point of view, there would be absolutely nothing to do after dark in downtown St. Louis, and the elegant hotel is really

Today we just stopped for a few minutes at the hotel. We had to officially check in and get our registration materials. **[They've since done away with formal check-in at nationals.]** The kids were impressed that the man who ran the tournament knew my name, as did the woman who was passing out materials. My bet is that there were just few enough schools that hadn't yet checked in that they lucked out. This was our sixth trip to nationals, though, and over the years a few problems have popped up that caused me to visit with both the bigwig and his assistant. Perhaps they are good with names and really did remember me.

We walked from the hotel past Busch Stadium and on to the Metrolink station of that name **[which is, by the way, where the Metrolink platform picture that appeared earlier was taken]**. It's probably about equidistant from the hotel to both 8th and Pine and Busch Stadium stations. The kids liked the walk past Busch much better, though. Being the small-town boys they are, they really aren't used to "colorful" street life. St. Louis is frankly dull compared to most cities, but I'd suppose almost any street life can be intimidating to those who aren't used to dealing with it. The area by the stadium is barren and I'd bet quite a bit more crime-prone than the more populated streets further north. The kids found it more comfortable, though, so that's what we took the rest of the trip.

We basically went into the city just to check in at the tournament, and then we turned around and went back to O'Fallon. As we waited for a train we heard over and over again: "Attention passengers. Due to technical difficulties Metrolink will be running a bus bridge between the Memorial Hospital and the Belleville stations. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused." A rather unapologetic black woman made the announcement. What made them especially odd was that it wasn't just the same announcement

repeated over and over again. The words were the same, but the inflection and the background noise was different each time. I kept imagining some poor woman sitting at a microphone saying the same thing over and over again.



Two Garrigan students on a Metrolink train – Fairview Heights, Illinois

The driver on the train also kept announcing the bus bridge. She said “Belleville” so it sounded more like “BALL-ul”, but the point got across. The ride was uneventful, and before long we were back at Memorial Hospital.

I went well out of my way getting back to the motel. There was no way I was going to re-trace the route I’d followed getting to Memorial Hospital, though; I couldn’t remember it if I tried. I headed northwestward on route 161, paralleling the Metrolink tracks. At the Fairview Heights station I turned east onto St. Clair Avenue, the strip that eventually lead to the Sleep Inn. It took about fifteen minutes to get from Fairview Heights to O’Fallon (maybe 5 or 6 miles), but eventually we made it.

There was one more item on the agenda today. After I made up a list of possible activities in St. Louis, one of the students had noticed that among them was the opera. While I honestly expected that to be the last choice of most of the kids, he genuinely wanted to go. I agreed to accompany him there (the other kids entertained themselves this evening by swimming in the motel pool and playing board games) and had bought two tickets for *Tosca* ahead of time.

Unfortunately the problems with the train had all but guaranteed we would be late. Showtime was 8pm. It was now 7:30, and the theatre was clear over in the Missouri suburbs. I was tired, too, and I almost suggested we just forfeit the tickets. They cost \$35 each, though, which was an awful lot of money to just write off. So, late or not, we headed off.

First, though, we stopped for dinner. No one in the group had eaten since Fazoli’s at noon. The rest of the group was sending out for pizza, but the two of us who were headed to the opera were also famished. We stopped at a Hardees just over the interstate from the motel. They’ve apparently changed their menu at Hardees, and I can’t say I care much for the change. I always used to order ham and cheese sandwiches at Hardees. Now, though, there was nothing but hamburgers on the menu—and at that, you couldn’t just get a normal hamburger. Aside from little miniature burgers, the smallest item on their menu was a one-third pound “thickburger”, and the choices got bigger from there. If I wanted that much beef, I certainly wouldn’t go to a fast food place to get it.

... Not that his was exactly a **fast** food place. Since we were already late, I suppose it didn’t really matter, but it seemed to take forever for them to cook our food. I suppose those thick burgers just don’t cook that fast—yet another reason not to have them. The food wasn’t really that bad, but it was both slow and more than I wanted.

Traffic was light at night, but it still took forever to get across greater St. Louis. It amazes me that a place so large should have so many four-lane (as opposed to six- or eight-lane) highways. In some cases three different highways run together, but there are still no extra lanes.

Probably the most interesting thing we passed on the way to the opera was Larry Flint’s Hustler Club, which is just north of the interstate at the exit that leads to the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center. The place, which I assume was either a strip club or an erotic theater, was lit up in pink and purple neon. Part of the neon flashed the outline of a woman’s breasts. Even New Orleans was not so overtly tacky about things.

Three interstates and at least two U.S. highways all join together in a maze of spaghetti that probably destroyed what was once downtown East St. Louis. Metrolink runs beneath all of this, but tonight we were right on top, hundreds of feet above the wasteland below. They run four continuous lanes onto the Mississippi River bridge, but those lanes are not beside each other. Instead

it looks like there are right and left exits, plus two center lanes, when in fact everything ends up on the bridge at the other end of the spaghetti.

Across the bridge they built the split of those three freeways on just about as little land as possible. Fortunately we (I-64) were going straight ahead. I-70 and I-55 split off in ghastly 20 mph exits that lead straight into 70 mph traffic. I-64 runs on a viaduct above a railroad right-of-way (part of which is used by Metrolink) through most of St. Louis. It, too, was built on almost no land (the exact opposite of the ESL interchange). In fact, in a couple of places the eastbound lanes run on top of the westbound lanes, rather than beside them.

I-64 through St. Louis (locals call it by its former name “U.S. 40”) has to be just about the first freeway ever built. I’m sure it was built to be picturesque. Today it’s just maddening curves with exits about every 500 feet (counting up to “F” in the same mile). It was very busy even at night. Unfortunately, since the whole thing is a viaduct and most of it doesn’t really have a real shoulder to begin with, there’s really not much they can do to modernize the mess.

Not helping at all was the fact that it was now pouring rain. It’s interesting that in the North even a thunderstorm basically seems to “rain”, while in the south a shower can truly “pour”. There was no thunder or lightning to this storm, but St. Louis proved it was a southern city; it was pouring so hard I could barely see, even with the wipers on their fastest speed.

We drove clear through the city. I exited at Big Bend Boulevard, and followed that west for what seemed like forever through quaint old suburbs with two-lane “downtown” streets. This is the area they’re expanding Metrolink to, and—believe me—they definitely need something to relieve congestion. Finally we came to Bompert Street and Webster University, home of the St. Louis Opera Theatre. **[The location of the opera tells you something about the make up of the St. Louis area. Anywhere else you’d expect the opera to be in a historic downtown theatre. Here, though, the opera company that bears the city’s name is in fact located in the suburbs.]**

OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS

I’d gotten directions to the opera’s parking area on the internet. What their website didn’t say was that parking cost \$6 and that it was insufficient for the crowd in attendance. I circled the full lot and ended up parking in the lot of a Lutheran church across the street. The lot was clearly marked as private property, and many of the spaces were specifically numbered. I chose to park in one that said “church visitors” and figured it was unlikely they’d be towing a suburban. Other opera patrons had obviously also parked in the illegal lot; indeed a well-dressed couple who was also tardy was getting out of their car at the same time we did. I crossed my fingers that we’d be okay and we made our way to the theatre.

We were certainly not the only latecomers at the opera. We presented our tickets, and the usher handed us programs. She told us, though, that we’d have to wait until intermission to be seated—a sensible rule, and one they should enforce in California. She showed us to a waiting area where we could watch the opera on closed circuit TV along with about two dozen other tardy souls. The TV was a good idea, though really it didn’t work very well. Theatrical lighting made the whole screen look blue, with the characters moving around as eerie white shadows,

almost as if it were a moving X-ray. The sound got mused in transmission, making it impossible to distinguish any individual words. Mostly I filled the time until intermission reading the program.

That program made it clear that opera is geared toward a slightly higher income level than mine **[and “slightly” is sarcastic here]**. I recently heard a bit on Paul Harvey that noted the St. Louis Opera Theatre was one of the few profitable opera companies in the country. They certainly ought to be. In addition to pricey tickets (\$35 was the second-lowest price), they have a variety of levels of individual and corporate sponsorship. Just getting your name listed in the program costs a minimum of \$1,000, and the levels go up and up and up. “Gold” is \$25,000, and there are at least two levels above that. I suppose for a major company (Anheuser-Busch or Ralston-Purina) \$100,000 is small change, but they had three or four individual sponsors at that level too.

The program spelled out specific rules of etiquette for the opera. Some, such as entering and leaving only at intermission were obvious. We were also directed to refrain from talking and to stifle any coughs during the performance. A bit more unusual was the directive to refrain from eating cellophane-wrapped candies or mints during the performance. I can understand that the noise of unwrapping candy would be distracting, but I kept imagining who would eat during a theatrical performance. At most, I would think someone might get out a tic-tac to silence that forbidden cough. What anyone would be doing carrying around cellophane-wrapped candy to begin with, I have no clue. I also found out that both smoking and chewing tobacco were inappropriate during the performance; I almost exclaimed “duh” while reading. What’s sad is that almost certainly some rude person actually did chew and spit during a performance at some point, or it never would have occurred to anyone to put that in there.

We entered at intermission (the first of two intermissions, actually) and saw a very simple, modern theatre. There’s probably seating for about 1,000 in what comes across as a very intimate space. It could be on any college campus anywhere and certainly

didn't come across as an "opera house". The stage is very flexible. All the main floor seating is moveable (like the UNI theatre), so they can do just about whatever they want with the space. We sat on a side balcony, looking out at the thrust stage from stage left **[literally at a right angle]**. A series of catwalks was above us, and during intermission people scurried along them making changes in the lighting.

We got a good view of the crowd at intermission. The place was probably two-thirds full, with mostly the poorer seats available. There were far more women than men, and it tended toward an older group. While there were a handful of black women in furs, well over 90% of the audience was white. The men in attendance were dressed well, but hardly to the nines. Open dress shirts were typical; suits were not. I wore a tie with a dress shirt and was toward the top end of the men. The women, on the other hand, definitely **dressed** for the opera. Indeed, you'd think many of them had dressed for the Academy Awards. The low end of the women were in skirted business suits, and floor length silk was not uncommon. Ostentatious jewelry was everywhere; I'm sure many of the ladies were sporting ensembles worth many thousands of dollars. All the fashions were extremely conservative—no plunging necklines or high slit skirts. Most of them really seemed more appropriate for a winter wedding (from a guest who wanted to show up the bride) than an evening out in summer. I certainly see nothing wrong with dressing up, but some of these ladies really over-did it.

The set was lovely. Everything was centered on a gorgeous floor in a mosaic design that resembled marble and hardwood. The floor was that of the apartment of a wealthy gentleman who is one of the main characters in the opera. Upstage they had an enormous bed and downstage a table and desk alluded to other parts of the apartment. Brass chandeliers and candelabra with what I'd bet were gas lights filled all the empty corners of the set. The costuming was also gorgeous, with fine velvets and lace accented by gold accessories. The effect was quite elegant and really lovely.

I wish I could compliment the opera itself as much as the production values. I'm sure it was well-sung, but I'm just not an opera person. Much of it I simply couldn't understand. I remember all the "old fogies" commenting on how they could never understand the words in rock music when I was growing up. Well, *Tosca* was sung in English, but most of the time it might just as well have been in Italian—or Chinese or Sanskrit or Eskimo. Everyone on stage sang well, but they were mush-mouthed and full of vibrato, which made most of the meaning of what they were singing get lost along the way. The music itself was good, but honestly I'd have enjoyed it more if it were a symphony. **[The two times I have been to symphonies, I enjoyed them immensely.]** Then I'd have concentrated on the music, rather than trying to make sense of the words. Perhaps if they'd had a full libretto it would have been nicer.

When I could catch the words, they either didn't fit well with the music, didn't make a lot of sense, or used remarkably modern and casual language that didn't go with the era in which the play was set. It was like taking a stately old hymn and re-translating it to something like "Hey, God—what's up, dude" (something hymnal editors seem to love these days—though they'd almost certainly not use the masculine "dude" to refer to the Deity in the new translation). The point is, those words I could understand almost got in the way. *Tosca* was written in Italian in the late 1800s. There were countless excellent British and American poets in that era, and I couldn't help but think that any of them surely could have done it more justice in English than whoever wrote this nonsense.

In Act 3 of *Tosca*, pretty much everyone dies. Perhaps I've been spoiled by the Broadway touring companies with all their mega-effects, but the assorted deaths in *Tosca* were downright hokey. The main character supposedly commits suicide by jumping off a roof. In fact the actress hurled herself downward all of about two feet downward from one level to another. I didn't expect her to actually die, but a simple freeze would have been more effective than her silly "jump". Another character is shot to death, and he expired with all the melodrama of a bad western movie.

All through the opera, they had the hands of the conductor projected in black and white on two TV screens toward the rear of the theatre. After pondering a bit, the reason was obvious. The conductor was facing the orchestra in a pit below the stage. In that location the actors on stage really couldn't see him at all. By projecting his hands (which is really all that matters with a conductor), they could be sure to be in sync with the music.

It was interesting that a number of opera-goers were at least as uninitiated as me. Those etiquette rules in the program specifically caution that the only time applause is appropriate is at the end of an act, not merely after each number. That's apparently a big difference between the opera and those Broadway musicals that are essentially operas with modern music. Toward the middle of the second act there was a climax that featured the lead character belting out an emotional song. When she finished several people started applauding, and one man just a few rows behind us exploded with bravos (or whatever the appropriate plural of that word may be). Later on several people applauded one of the deaths as movie-goers might applaud when the bad guy kicks the bucket in a melodrama. It was here that I could tell that the image of the conductor's hands was live, rather than recorded. Both in person and on TV he appropriately paused for the unsanctioned applause and then continued directing again.

I really can't end my opera story with any "fat lady" jokes. The soprano lead in an overwhelmingly masculine show was slightly overweight, but not at all unattractive. What's more, since her character committed suicide, it wasn't over when she finished singing. Indeed, this show ended not with a fat lady, but with a rather gaunt-looking young man.

The single worst part of the whole opera was the curtain call. It was endless. Except for a chorus that never did come out for acknowledgement, the cast was really quite small (six or seven people). Nonetheless, it took a full five minutes to get them all out on stage. Each actor in turn bowed and threw kisses to one side of the theatre, then the other, then to center—waiting until the applause started dying down in one section before turning to the next. After all the actors had been acknowledged, the tuxedo-clad conductor rose from the pit on a little elevator and took his turn at milking the audience. The men in the cast presented flowers to the female lead, and then the whole group did their three-way bow. In fact they did the three-way bow twice before it finally occurred to them that the applause was dying rather than building to screams for more. They finally threw one big group kiss to the ceiling and exited. By this time almost everyone near any aisle had made a dash for their car. I, unfortunately, was sandwiched in the middle of a row next to a

lady who seemed to feel any opera deserved a standing ovation (most of the audience didn't stand at any point during the curtain call), so I was trapped until she decided it was time to go.

It bothered me a bit that except for the conductor, who seemed like a pompous old cuss if ever there was one, the orchestra never got acknowledged at all. It's traditional in musical theatre to end the curtain call by having the cast gesture toward the pit to acknowledge that without the accompaniment the show would be nothing. The same statement could be made at the opera, but no one ever remotely acknowledged the fact that there was a really quite wonderful orchestra playing in the background. Nor did they acknowledge the chorus (listed as "nuns and soldiers" in the program), much of whose music I liked quite a bit better than the solos.

It was interesting to see the opera, but I certainly won't be hurrying back. It probably was good that we were here tonight, though, rather than tomorrow. At least *Tosca* is a well-known show by a famous composer. Tomorrow they would have the North American premiere of an opera called *Flight*. Written in Britain in 1998, the opera centers around people who are stranded in an airport when storms ground all flights. That doesn't sound like an especially interesting premise for a play, let alone an opera.

The suburban was still in the Lutherans' visitor parking, and there was no ticket on the windshield. My bet is that even if it was illegal to park there, no cop in his right mind would want to leave his nice warm car to go out in the pouring rain and write that ticket. We re-traced our steps back and got back to O'Fallon right around midnight. One of the rooms of kids was already asleep; I woke them up checking on them. The other was watching a movie on cable TV, and it was very clear that if anything untoward had happened while I was away, they had carefully concealed all evidence. (With the group I had this year, I really had no worries at all—but one does always wonder.) We made arrangements for when we would leave tomorrow, and then I headed back to my room to go to bed.

FRIDAY, JUNE 11

GREATER ST. LOUIS

The kids would have slept all day if I had let them. I, on the other hand, never slept like a teenager even when I was a teenager. **[That is an absolutely true statement. I've always wondered how most kids can sleep so late, when I never did.]** As an adult I'm always up early when I travel. I spent about forty-five minutes walking around the neighborhood, basically up and down the strip. I had a bite of breakfast at a Jack-in-the-Box and then made my way back to the motel. By that time a few of the kids were enjoying the motel's own continental breakfast. I joined them and had a pre-packaged individual bowl of cereal that was really more like candy than breakfast food. Called "Cinnamon Toast Crunch", its first ingredient was corn syrup, and three other types of sugar were among the top six ingredients. It was tasty, if not exactly nutritious, and the cover of the bowl set the theme of the day with "Breakfast Quiz Bowl", a set of trivia questions I shared with the kids. **[Aldi sells a knock-off of Cinnamon Toast Crunch that I've bought a few times since. I wouldn't dream of eating the stuff for breakfast regularly, but it makes a nice snack.]**

There was one other group of high school students in the motel, and they were having breakfast as we did. The group was a boys' volleyball team whose T-shirts said "Addison High School". Wherever Addison is (I only know it as a street in Chicago), it must be a heavily Jewish area. While they sported athletic clothes on most of their bodies, several of the boys wore yarmulkes on their heads. **[A quick Google search revealed numerous Addison High Schools around the country. The most likely bet for the school we saw would be DuPage County, Illinois—the wealthy suburbs west of Chicago. There are also Addison High Schools in the suburbs of Detroit, Cleveland, and New York City, all of which would also be likely to have significant Jewish populations.]**

I had a message on my cell phone this morning, the first time I've ever had one. The parents of the boy who had gone to the opera with me had called while we were at the opera (needless to say, cell phones are forbidden inside the theatre). They needed to contact their son about something involving his college registration. I passed the message along to the kid and lent him my phone so he could call home. **[How strange to think of lending a kid my phone. These days virtually every student (and absolutely every senior) has his own cell phone.]** Unfortunately no one was there when he called.

We left the motel around 9:30, a time the kids found early that I would call mid-morning. Not knowing if there would still be problems on Metrolink, today I chose to drive to the Fairview Heights station, which was well within the unaffected region. It seemed to take about the same length of time to get to as Swansea, and the ride into St. Louis from there was significantly shorter—an added bonus.

Fairview Heights has an incredibly huge park-and-ride, and the lot was almost entirely full when we got there. We managed to find a space clear out by the highway, a brisk five-minute walk from the platform. A train soon arrived, and we made our way without incident to Busch Stadium.

We walked to the Drury Plaza and had about forty-five minutes to kill before it was time for our first game. The kids explored the lobby area (the rest of the hotel is secure; you can't even use the elevators unless you have a room key), and then they sat around a big circular couch and played "telephone" to pass the time. Eventually the game before ours let out and we could go into the competition room.

Our first game today was against Lakota High School, the first school from North Dakota ever to come to the National Academic Championships. Lakota is a small town about an hour west of Grand Forks, and their school would be equivalent to a small rural district in Iowa. After competing against guys in suits from Houston in our first game last year, it was nice to have something a bit

less intimidating this time. No one gets to nationals unless they are at least somewhat good, though, so we certainly couldn't take this game for granted.

As we waited for the game to begin I snapped the obligatory formal pictures on the game show set. I had borrowed a digital camera from Sarah Freking at school, and the woman who was working the electronic equipment in the room looked impressed and asked to see it. That woman, Tanya, is the Russian wife of the man who runs the tournament. She is a nut for electronics and does all the technical work for the tournament. I'm pretty sure she thought the camera was a much higher quality machine than it was, for when she looked at it up close she was notably less impressed than she had been from a distance. It's not a bad camera, but it's nothing state-of-the-art. Tanya spoke in terms of mea-pixels, which I don't understand at all. I do know this camera works perfectly well for the stuff we do on the school website and that more detailed cameras create huge files that take forever to download on the internet. This one worked fine for our purposes, and I thank Sarah for letting me use it. **[I'm now in charge of the Garrigan website. We still have the old Sony camera I refer to here, though we almost never use it. Like so many electronic items, it has been superseded by equipment that is at once smaller, cheaper, and higher quality. The cameras we mostly use today do indeed create huge files, but we reduce them before posting things online.]**



Getting ready for competition

phone and asked them to call KLGA with the results. There was one other area school competing at nationals this year, and it was convenient that while bragging about our success they could also pass on the news that North Kossuth had lost by a score of 220 – 165 to Altamont, a school from Birmingham, Alabama. The radio people took the message, and I gather the news was played up pretty big that day.

It was shortly after noon, and the next thing on the agenda was lunch. I mentioned earlier that downtown St. Louis doesn't really have much of a selection to appeal to kids—almost nothing that was priced affordably. We ended up walking to Laclede's Landing, the "entertainment" district that is full of bars and nightclubs. I remembered seeing a "Subway" sign from the train station there, and indeed in the basement of one building they happened to have a Subway sandwich shop and a Chinese take-out place. That Subway was the only fast food I saw anywhere downtown, and just about the only thing that would cost less than \$10 per person.

While most of the kids ate at Subway, I and one of the students chose the Chinese place instead. I had rather nondescript almond chicken, but the more adventurous student selected a "sandwich special" at some unbelievably low price. The sandwich turned out to consist of bits of every type of meat (chicken, beef, pork, and shrimp) that were most likely left over from making "real" food. They were breaded together and deep fried like a tenderloin, then served on bread with sweet and sour sauce. The kid (who, perhaps needless to say, felt sick later on today) said he couldn't distinguish one kind of meat from another—it pretty much all tasted like deep fried mystery meat.

The student whose parents had called again tried to get in touch with them. This time he tried calling his mom's workplace. She wasn't there, but the boss was able to explain what was up. While apparently he had missed some deadline in selecting courses, there was really nothing he could do while away from home; he would have to try to talk his way out of it with the people at the college when he got back.

We took the train back to Busch Stadium and checked on tours of the facility. Apparently the last tour of the day had just left, so we wouldn't be able to take one until tomorrow. That left us with the better part of the afternoon to fill and not a lot to do. St. Louis is not a terribly exciting city, and we had plans to see most of the important tourist attractions later on. One minor attraction I suggested to the kids was Charles Lindbergh's plane (or a replica of it, I'm not sure) **[it's a replica]**, which hangs in the middle of the St. Louis airport. With no better ideas, the kids agreed that taking the train out to the airport would at least kill a bit of time.

We took the train out to the end of the line and made our way into the airport terminal. Two of the students had never been to an airport before, and they gawked at all the big planes. **[That still surprises me, since I remember taking Margaret and Paul to**

This turned out to be a relatively close game, but we pretty much led from beginning to end. You can substitute between rounds of a game at nationals, and I made a point of seeing that all the kids played. While two of them were technically "alternates", all six of them had qualified and were very deserving of playing. We had a good mix of people this year. While their biographies stressed math team, we had a good variety of skills. For just about the first time ever we had people who could answer English questions, and they also did well with geography and religion (an area that's often not that easy for Catholic school kids, since the questions frequently involve Bible references that are easy for church-going Protestants, but much less important to Catholics). They did okay with art and music, and they rejoiced on those rare occasions when sports or "pop culture" happened to come up. Our glaring weakness this year, as always, was science. In the end we beat Lakota 235 – 170.

Two of our competitors worked for the local radio station, so after the game I gave them my cell

airports when they flew to Europe in my youth.] One of the others frequently flew to visit relatives halfway across the country and could hardly believe how impressed the non-fliers were.

My cell phone rang at the airport. I was so unused to hearing it ring that I hadn't expected it, and the caller had hung up before I was able to answer. The students recognized the number that had called as being radio station KLGA. I called back to see what they wanted. It turned out that their afternoon host often does trivia questions as part of his show. He thought it would be interesting to interview the students and then quiz the quiz bowl team. I proposed the idea to the students, and they agreed it might be fun. We set a time (about an hour and a half later) and proceeded to kill time at the airport.

The Lindbergh plane hangs directly above the entrance to security at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. There's a phone bank and a bunch of chairs on the upper level of the airport, overlooking security. We pretty much killed the afternoon relaxing in those chairs and watching people go through security. Being the teenaged boys they were, the kids couldn't help but notice and comment on the many cute women who passed through the line. Time went remarkably quickly **[though this was without question the dullest thing we ever did at national quiz bowl]**, and before long it was time for the KLGA quiz.



**Spirit of St. Louis replica
Lambert—St. Louis International Airport**

KLGA was supposed to call back to my cell phone. Unfortunately it had been on around the clock for two days straight and was starting to run low on power. I suggested to the kids that we'd do better to call the station from a pay phone. We used a calling card to do that, and got through with no problem.

Bryce Wilson from KLGA did a nice interview with our captain. He seemed surprised that we were spending the afternoon at the airport, and even more surprised when he found out that one of the places the kids were planning to visit was the Anheuser-Busch brewery. That's probably the single most interesting tourist attraction in St. Louis, but Bryce questioned if it was appropriate for underage kids. Our captain assured him that their only interest in it was historical. That's not as far from the truth as you might think. The majority of kids in this group don't drink and make a rather definite point that they are non-drinkers. **[I'm not sure "majority" was actually correct there, but there were in fact some quite definite tea-totalers in the group.]** While at least one of the guys has been known to indulge, his actions seem to vary depending on who he's with—in this group he wouldn't be drinking.

One thing that's kind of nice about having a group from a Catholic school is that no one I need to care about would worry about whether visiting the brewery was appropriate. I'd imagine a lot of public school groups in similar situations might get a lot of flack from fundamentalist Protestants if they took kids on that tour. While there are certainly Catholics who don't drink **[though not many of them]**, no one Catholic sees drinking as sinful the way some Protestants do. They can also distinguish between going on an industrial tour and actually drinking while underage—two very different things.

Bryce asked a lengthy series of questions, which our captain attempted to repeat for the group—even though he was having trouble hearing over the surrounding airport noise. The kids answered the majority of questions on their own, but I did help them out with a couple of them. There were one or two they missed and a couple of others that we would have gotten, except a key part of the question got lost in the repetition. Bryce seemed impressed with the kids' knowledge, and when I got back to Algona a couple of people suggested that I must have helped the kids out—they couldn't possibly have known so much. As I said, I may have offered a couple of answers, but the vast majority were from the kids. Indeed, they almost always surprise me by knowing a wide assortment of things about which I am clueless.



Brad Rutter

When we got back to the Drury Plaza there was still over an hour until our next game. We sat in on the game before ours and watched Chaska, Minnesota totally obliterate Altamont, the team North Kossuth had lost to earlier today. **[Chaska is a perennial powerhouse at nationals.]** (In the mean time N.K. had been wiped out 340 – 80 by New Rochelle, New York.) Chaska would definitely be my pick for the best team at the tournament. It would be interesting to see them play Ankeny or Ames—the schools that are definitely the best in Iowa, but who never go to nationals.

One of the workers in this room was rather annoying. I forget his name (though he said it frequently enough), but apparently he had won \$1 million in a special *Jeopardy* competition last year. We'd hear him introduce himself three times, and each time he say something like "You may recognize me. (I sure didn't.) Last year *Jeopardy* gave away a million dollars, and—gee (false modesty)—they decided to give it to me." The guy had a superior air about him in just about everything he did. He scolded students for missing answers he thought they should get right, even obscure things I'd certainly never heard of. He also talked down to the kids and seemed amused at their biographies. For instance, probably the most intellectual person on our team, and certainly the best read, was Mike Blocker. (I know I said I'd try to avoid bringing up names, but you've already read Mike's biography.) Mike has beach boy long hair and a lot of teenaged interests, though. The reader couldn't get past the fact that in his biography Mike said he liked rollerblading. Somehow quiz bowl and rollerblading just didn't go together in this man's head. Pretty much all our team was well-rounded this year, rather than just being classic nerds, but I guess the concept of the Renaissance man was lost on this guy.

[This emcee was Brad Rutter, who to this day has won more money on *Jeopardy* than anyone else—including the much better known Ken Jennings. He was a five-time winner who accumulated \$55,000 and went on to win the 2001 Tournament of Champions. The event Rutter was referring to here was the “Million Dollar Masters” tournament, a sort of all-time tournament of champions that was held in 2002 to commemorate the 4000th episode of the current incarnation of the game show. Rutter later went on to win *Jeopardy*’s “Ultimate Tournament of Champions” in 2005, where his prize was an additional \$2,115,000. He had a connection with the National Academic Championships, because he captained the winning team at nationals for two years in the mid ‘90s. He probably was a classic quiz bowl nerd himself in high school. Rutter would continue to host at nationals for several years, and I’d get to like him better. Perhaps as he became wealthier he felt it was less necessary to put people down, or perhaps he just grew up. One way or another, I would eventually have a better opinion of him than I had in St. Louis.]

The other worker in this room was more what I’ve come to expect at nationals. He was a life-long radio announcer who had spent some time hosting game shows. Picture a Wink Martindale who didn’t age so well, and you’d pretty much have this guy. He was semi-retired now, but he spent some time hosting a televised high school quiz program in West Virginia. Radio people make good quiz bowl readers. My brother Steve is just about the best reader we ever get at the tournament we host at Garrigan, and he’s pointed out that his experience in radio helps him out when he reads.

Our second game of the day was vs. Fisher Catholic High School from Lancaster, Ohio. This is a huge suburban school for wealthy people (many of whom aren’t Catholic) in greater Columbus. It would be somewhat equivalent to Dowling here in Iowa and even more equivalent to the big Catholic high schools in the Twin Cities area. When they read the kids’ bios and asked them a few questions, we could tell that Fisher was in a different world from Garrigan. Our seniors were planning on attending Luther, St. John’s of Minnesota (not the famous St. John’s), Benedictine College of Ohio, and the University of San Diego next year. That’s about as impressive a list of colleges as we ever get at Garrigan, but it seemed trivial compared to the Fisher kids’ choices of Carnegie-Mellon, Case Western Reserve, Columbia, and (they were from Columbus) Ohio State. I suppose actually Carnegie-Mellon and Case Western Reserve are just nearby private colleges to someone from Ohio, not too unlike Luther is here. They certainly sound more impressive, though.

We got off to a good start and ended up leading for about half the game. I about died when we got to the lightning round and the kids selected “Bible” from among the various categories. I’ve mentioned before that as a Protestant myself I’m only too aware of what a poor Biblical background most Catholics have. This category turned out to be cute rhyming phrases, each of which was a clue to some Biblical figure. Amazingly, my kids got nine out of ten. Even stranger was that the one they missed was the one you’d expect Catholics to get: the Virgin Mary. We were in the lead coming out of the lightning round. Then, though, came the “Stump the Experts” round, a series of high-value toss-up questions that are supposed to be difficult. They were difficult for our kids (mostly obscure, advanced science), but Fisher breezed right through them. We didn’t play badly in this game, but in the end we lost to a better team 365 – 210.

The kids sent out for pizza again tonight. They invited me to join them, but pizza just didn’t sound good. I took the suburban out on my own and had dinner at White Castle. Then I stopped at a Schnuck’s supermarket and picked up some pop for the kids. Most of the registers at this Schnuck’s were self-checkouts, where you scanned and sacked everything yourself. That makes sense to me at K-Mart, where they have security at the doors, but I couldn’t help but wonder how they prevent shoplifting with a system like that in a supermarket. Even if they did have alarms at the doors, most groceries aren’t embedded with the electronics to activate them. While I, of course, scanned everything I took out of the store, I’d think it would be very easy to let some items pass on by. **[I suppose most people really are honest, and since groceries are mostly low-value items, the shoplifting wouldn’t add up to all that much value.]**

After having their pizza, the kids mostly spent the evening playing in the motel pool. I watched TV in my room, but periodically went downstairs to check on them. The first several times they were okay and having fun. The last time, though, there was a problem. One of the kids had jammed his toe into a drain in the pool. It was both cut and stubbed, and like any such injury, the bleeding looked impressive. By the time I went down to check on them they had already gotten a first aid kit from the front desk (they are smart high school kids, after all), and they mopped up the blood all around the pool with towels. After clarifying that the student was not seriously injured, I helped him fill out a mandatory injury report that the woman at the desk had to have as a record of the first aid kit’s having been open. Later on I gave him some additional band-aids to change the dressing, as well as some ibuprofen.

Needless to say, that put an end to the kids’ fun. They pretty quickly went upstairs and were in bed before long. Everybody, including me, was asleep before long.

SATURDAY, JUNE 12

GREATER ST. LOUIS

I went out walking again this morning. Today I stopped at Hardees before returning to the motel to have overly sweet cereal with our kids and the Addison volleyball team. While the kids gradually got themselves ready I killed time watching the local TV coverage of a 5-K run for breast cancer (or probably against breast cancer is a more appropriate description). Fifty-five thousand people were expected to participate in the event, most walking rather than actually competing in the race. **[I must say that I find it odd that so often events like this target BREAST cancer specifically. To me cancer is cancer, and I really don’t see why breast cancer should rate higher than lung, kidney, prostate, or skin cancer.]**

We drove back to Fairview Heights and found some indication of that cancer run. Even though it was Saturday the park-and-ride was packed, and we ended up nearly as far from the platform as we were yesterday. While we rode into the city we saw jammed trains full of people in pink T-shirts headed back to the suburbs. Once we reached downtown the platforms were jammed with those people, trying to get onto trains. We reached Busch Stadium, and the doors opened. I and four of the kids elbowed our way into the sea of pink T-shirts as they piled on board without pausing to let anyone off. The driver bellowed, "please clear the doors" and almost immediately shut them. Two of our kids were still on board. There was a woman with a baby stroller blocking one of the doors, and in the rush of people getting on, they couldn't get past her to exit. They had reached the doors now, and they were pushing on them in an attempt to open them. There was an emergency "door open" button on the outside of the door. I pushed it, but nothing happened. The driver again bellowed for everyone to stand clear; the train was about to move. I shouted to an employee on the platform that we still had people in our party on board. At first she made it seem as if it were our fault that the kids hadn't gotten off in time, but eventually she saw what was actually up. The employee also tried to push the "door open" button, but still nothing happened. She contacted the driver to let her know there were people who had to exit, but the driver refused to open the doors. Almost immediately the train left the platform—with two of our kids still on board and probably two hundred cancer runners left on the platform.

I lost my temper and pretty much exploded at the woman on the platform. It's unfortunate that it really wasn't her fault; but it really is inexcusable (on both the part of the driver and the idiots who boarded without regard to who might be leaving) to leave part of a group on the train. There's no reason the driver couldn't have opened the doors again to let the kids off, but she just went on her way as if she didn't care about anything. The woman on the platform contacted headquarters, which advised other platform workers to be on the lookout for our kids. Fortunately the kids were smart enough to go down to the next station, and then catch the next train back to Busch. They showed up about ten minutes later.

I'm still rather upset about the whole incident today. In fact, writing this travelogue sparked me to write Metrolink's customer service department to let them know what happened. I don't really expect any compensation (although refunding the cost of our day passes would be a nice way of apologizing), but they need to be aware that they have crowd control problems. **[I got a rather generic response from Metrolink with an apology but no offer of compensation.]** After ballgames in Chicago (a similar situation) they always have several employees on the ballpark platforms. Usually one is right at the edge to make sure everyone gets on and off okay. The driver can't leave until he gets a signal from the platform people to go. They really should do something similar during events in St. Louis.

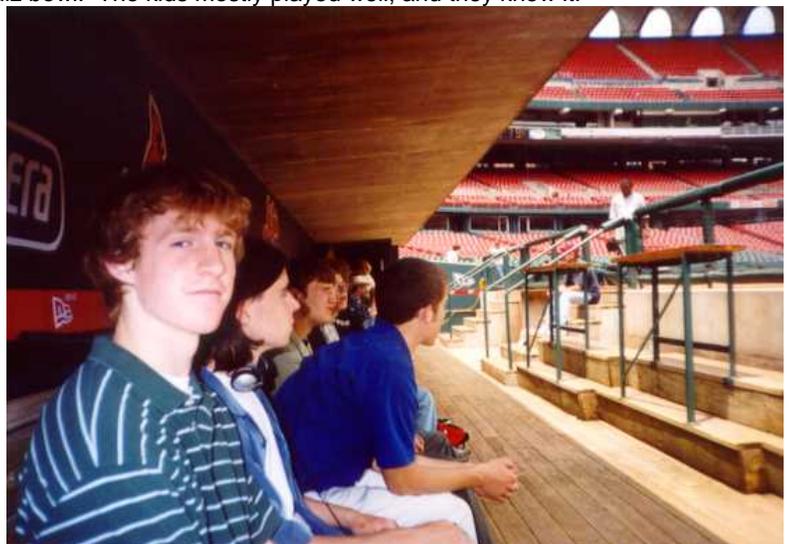
I'd like to use the train problem as an excuse for why we lost our next game—and it may have contributed. Really, though, our kids were just slow on the draw today. We played a team from Nebraska (Elkhorn) that we were probably better than, but our kids were just slow. Several times I could tell they knew an answer, but they hadn't signaled on their buzzers in time. Whatever the reason, Elkhorn ended up being our biggest loss, 445 – 125. Our consolation was that right before we played Chaska had handed North Kossuth the most lop-sided loss in the entire tournament, 555 – 50.

We had two games back to back this morning. Right after falling to Elkhorn we walked down the hall and played Seaholm, a huge wealthy high school (think Ankeny or Bettendorf) from Birmingham, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. As with Elkhorn, we probably should have won this game. Seaholm was big, but they really weren't that good of a team. (Our kids frequently beat Ft. Dodge and Mason City High, which are very comparable.) **[Interestingly, neither Ft. Dodge nor Mason City has fielded a quiz bowl team in recent years.]** Seaholm started out on top, but we caught up and held a lead through the lightning round. Unfortunately, toward the beginning of "Stump the Experts" there was a question about Detroit that people from Michigan would likely know but most other people (including the seven Iowans in the room) wouldn't. That's pretty much luck of the draw; they have regional questions from all over the country, and Seaholm just happened to get the one on Michigan. That one question changed the momentum of the game, though. Our kids played well the rest of the game, but they ended up losing by the equivalent of about three of those "expert" questions, 320 – 250.

That meant we finished 1 – 3 overall, when we probably should have gone 3 – 1. One team got lucky, and another was just faster on the trigger. It's no big deal; this is, after all only quiz bowl. The kids mostly played well, and they knew it.

After the game we went to the International Bowling Museum, which also serves as the starting point for Busch Stadium tours. Two of the kids had no interest in touring the stadium, so they split from the group and went to Union Station, a snooty mall west of downtown. The rest of us paid our admission and made our way through the rather encyclopedic history of bowling. **[I'm not sure if the bowling museum still exists after the downtown renovations that went with constructing a new Busch Stadium. The place was fascinating, if perhaps a bit too detailed.]** Eventually it came time to start the stadium tour.

I've toured five ballparks now: Camden Yards, Wrigley Field, Skydome, Comiskey Park, and Busch Stadium. **[Since this trip, I've also toured Miller Park and the old Yankee Stadium.]** Wrigley Field was definitely the best of the tours (even though I'm more a fan of the White Sox than the Cubs), and without a doubt Busch was the worst. The bowling museum was



In the dugout at (old) Busch Stadium

fascinating by comparison. Trust me, if you're in St. Louis with an entire day to kill, you'll find it more interesting to watch people go through security at the airport than to tour Busch Stadium.



Posing by a statue of Ozzie Smith outside Busch Stadium

We basically saw three things on the tour. First we walked back and back and back to get to the Batter's Eye Club, just about the only novel feature in a very nondescript park. Every baseball park has a "batter's eye", a dark-colored area in centerfield that the batter can focus on so he can clearly see the ball when it is pitched. Sometimes (as at the Metrodome) that amounts to a bunch of empty seats that are just never sold. Other times (like at Kaufmann Stadium in Kansas City) there's a park area that can really be quite lovely. In St. Louis they've constructed the batter's eye out of one-way glass. From the field, it looks like a big splotch of green in the outfield; you'd probably guess it was metal or plastic, rather than glass. Behind that glass, though, is a "club" where rich people pay top dollar for bad seats. For \$70 - \$80 (other outfield seats cost less than \$10), you get a seat, a buffet meal, and open bar. I'm sure it's that last feature that attracts people to the place. You can't see squat of the game from the batter's eye, so it's going there has to be just an excuse to get drunk.

Next we walked up and up and up and up to get to the pressbox. It looked like a pressbox. At Camden Yards they showed us how they make those electronic effects on the scoreboard, and at Wrigley we got to lean out over the crowd like Harry Carey did for the National Anthem. Here we saw a bunch of phones set up at tables.

Finally we walked down and down and down and down to get to the Cardinals' dugout. It looked like a dugout, a very well-worn dugout for that matter. The Orioles had us reach the dugout by going through the tunnel the players go through, and at Wrigley we saw the players locker rooms (Sammy Sosa has a whole extra locker, just to store his fan mail). Here we walked through the seating bowl to get to the dugout.

Other ballpark tours have included an assortment of more interesting things. At Camden Yards they pointed out the beverage transportation system, with miles and miles of beer pipes running all over the stadium. At Skydome they explained how the dome opened and closed and how they changed the artificial turf. At Comiskey they took us to the room where the players children are baby-sat during the game, showed us the satellite broadcasting facilities, and took complimentary photographs of each visitor standing right at home plate. At Wrigley they let all the visitors go out on the field, play catch, and run the bases. Here we were told in no uncertain terms that our feet were not to touch the grass, nor should our eyes stray into any unauthorized areas **[a fascinating attitude for an old, crappy park that would be demolished just a few years later]**.

Our guide, a college-aged black kid, made this minimal tour all the worse. He rattled off his spiel with no enthusiasm whatsoever, and some of the facts he presented were simply wrong. The one interesting thing happening in the stadium while we were there was a wedding taking place near first base. Three different times people on the tour asked him about the wedding, but he just pretended it didn't exist. If he didn't know who was getting married, he could have at least told us how one might go about arranging such a ceremony. The guide dropped us off at the gift shop. We all immediately exited; nothing we had seen or heard inspired anyone to buy any Cardinals memorabilia.

We took the train over to Union Station, where the other two kids were waiting on the platform. They had done the mall and had lunch, but it was already mid-afternoon and the rest of us hadn't had a bite to eat since breakfast. So we all went inside the mall (a very pretentious mall that's mostly gift shops—no department stores and very few stores that sell anything practical). They had a substantial food court, though, and everyone had a quick bite to eat. By this point most of the group was getting downright bored with downtown St. Louis, and the group consensus was to just head back to the motel.

The kids basically napped this afternoon. I've never been a napper, though, so I set out walking again. This time I walked eastward toward central O'Fallon. There's really nothing whatsoever of interest anywhere in O'Fallon (my destination ended up being a Walgreen's store, and I went in there mostly because it was air conditioned), but walking around filled the time. I also bought gas at a Quik Trip next to the motel and watched a bit of television. Then, before long, it was time for our evening excursion.



**Playing hacky-sack in the plaza in front of a Metrolink station
Fairview Heights, Illinois**

trams that take you to the top to arrive. You spend about another five minutes crammed inside the tram, then finally you're up at the top. At that point there's another wait before you can actually lean against the wall at one of the tiny windows.

Once you finally look out, the view is really rather a let-down. Eastward you look out over the polluted river toward the abandoned factories of East St. Louis. To the west there is the tiny St. Louis downtown (most noteworthy here is the old courthouse where the Dred Scott decision was made) and beyond that more shells of smokestack factories. The arch is really by far the most attractive thing in greater St. Louis; when you're there, there's not much else to see.

After doing the arch we stopped one more time at the Drury Plaza to check out which teams had made the play-offs and see how N.K. had ended up faring. While we don't wish our neighbors bad, no one felt too bad to see that they had gone 0 – 4, losing their last game 280 – 200 to a team from Drummond, Oklahoma. It was also some consolation to see that the teams that had beaten us ended up going on to play-offs. We pondered what might have been for us, and then made our way back to the train.

Bush Stadium station was rather creepy at night. The station is in an open trench below street level, and it is not very badly lit. Metrolink uses "honor system" ticketing, so anyone who wants to can come down to the platforms without even having to go through a turnstile. There were no employees in the station, and a group of less than savory young men on the opposite platform made me just a tad nervous as we waited.

Metrolink's trains run frequently at night, but not all of them go all the way to the terminals. After 9pm every other train ends at Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center, where Metrolink has its storage yard. We had apparently just missed a train, and—needless to say—the next one to arrive was a JJK train. I suggested we board and take the train to Laclede's Landing, which would be a somewhat more pleasant place to wait than Busch Stadium. We waited there on a steamy platform as we listened over and over again to the "bus bridge" announcement. Several people on the platform were confused about what that meant, and we explained it to them as we

We had made reservations ahead of time to visit the Gateway Arch at night. We drove back to Fairview Heights and took the train to Laclede's Landing, then walked across a vast park that surrounds the arch. Metrolink was too efficient this time, so we arrived with time to kill before our timed tickets were valid. The kids did the dull gift shop in no time, and most of them had seen the even duller museum a few years ago when they were here on a music trip. We pretty much twiddled our thumbs for a while until finally it came time to go up.

The arch is set up sort of like a doctor's office. When the time comes for your "appointment" you think you're making progress, but you really just end up in another waiting area. You kill quite a bit of time in a dull little museum that explains how the arch was constructed, then you kill even more time waiting for the

waited. Eventually a train came, also with the destination “JJK”. It was supposed be every other train that ended short, but that made two in a row that stopped short. We waited a total of twenty minutes before we finally got a train that would take us to Fairview Heights.

I mentioned honor system ticketing. They do check for tickets frequently in St. Louis. I don't think I've ever been on Metrolink, on this trip or other times I was in St. Louis, when I wasn't asked for my ticket. I had purchased everyone in the group day passes good for each day we took the train. Several times employees asked for the passes, both on the trains and in stations. In fact, while we were waiting at Laclede's Landing, two different people asked to see our tickets. Everything was fine, of course, since we all had our passes. I have no idea, then why when yet another employee came around the train asking for passes, one of the boys didn't have his. It probably was lost under the seat or something, but he didn't have it immediately in his possession. Fortunately the woman was very kind to him and merely gave him a lecture, rather than the \$250 fine that is supposed to be automatic for fare evasion. **[It was probably helpful that he was obviously part of a group, all of whom had day passes. It really could have been a serious problem, though.]**

It was well after 10pm when we got to Fairview Heights. While our lunch had been late, it was still a long time ago. The kids and I were all famished, and we drove down the strip looking for an appropriate place to eat. We found a Burger King that was all lit up, I parked the car, and we went up to the door. The hours sign on the door said they were open until 11:00, and there were people eating inside, but the door was locked. We knocked, but no one responded. Eventually a girl wearing a Burger King uniform pulled up in the parking lot and explained that only the drive-through was open this late. She couldn't explain why there were people eating inside. Even stranger was what she was carrying. She had gone out to get food for her fellow Burger King employees to eat, food from Taco Bell.

I wasn't going to mess with the drive-through with a suburban full of kids. We kept on driving and eventually stopped at a Dairy Queen that was very much open. It took forever, but the food was good. After dinner we made our way back to the motel and pretty much collapsed.

SUNDAY, JUNE 7³ **O'FALLON, ILLINOIS TO ALGONA, IOWA**

The kids slept in late today. I was up fairly early and again took a lengthy morning walk. This time I stopped at McDonalds for coffee and then came back for a few more bites of breakfast at the motel.

Whenever I've done these quiz bowl trips, I've made a point of seeing the kids get to weekend mass. I think that as a Protestant I may be even a bit more conscious that they meet their Catholic obligation than some of the other staff members are. Most years we've gone to a beautiful and/or historic church, making it a bit of a tourist visit as well as a religious service. In St. Louis I had assumed we'd go to Saturday mass at either the historic old cathedral or the gorgeous new cathedral there. The kids had sung in the new cathedral when they were her for music a couple years ago, and going back to the motel yesterday afternoon made mass at the old cathedral impractical. So we settled on going to a parish church (St. Albert the Great) in Fairview Heights that we had passed several times on the way to and from the Metrolink station. They had held their annual parish carnival last night, and the parking lot was still set up with tents leftover from that. We found a place to park and made our way past them and into the church.

St. Albert is a large suburban church. The building is round, with the sanctuary covering about two-thirds of the circle. The altar is under an illuminated dome at the center with a cross hanging down above it. Behind the altar the third of the church that isn't sanctuary is separated by a brick wall covered with gorgeous copper and brass artwork. The place probably seats around a thousand, and it was more full than empty for the late morning mass today. It seemed like a large and active parish, with members of all ages.

That made it all the more surprising that the main feature of mass was the priest's reading a letter from the bishop that officially dissolved the parish, merging it with another large suburban church north of here in Caseyville. The Caseyville priest will apparently become the head pastor while the priest from Fairview Heights will be an assistant. They're apparently building a brand new church building to house the merged parish (St. Albert looks to date from the '60s and is in perfectly good shape), together with a new school. They'll be demolishing St. Albert and selling the land for an expansion of a nearby mall. The Caseyville church site will become the location of the new school, and the new church will be built on currently undeveloped land recently bought by the diocese. The homily today really had very little to do with the readings, but instead was sort of a farewell to the parish. The kids were understandably confused by the whole thing. They noted that tiny parishes in our area manage to support themselves, and they wondered why a huge suburban church couldn't do the same. **[I'm betting either the parish or the diocese got A LOT of money by selling the land for the mall expansion. There's really no other reason they'd abandon a building that was so new and in such good condition.]**

They were theoretically letting the parishioners vote on the name of the new parish, though the priest all but told them outright hey should vote for “Holy Trinity”. That priest remarked that some parishioners had complained that the proposed name sounded more Lutheran than Catholic (which it does to me—it could also be Episcopalian with that name, but not Catholic), but he said that shouldn't keep people from voting for it. Apparently they wanted a name that was completely different from both of the merging parishes (I think the other was Immaculate Conception) and one that no other church in the diocese had. That would narrow the choices, but it seems silly to have the parish “vote” on a pre-selected name—the sort of thing you'd find in a police state, rather than a church that was trying to be democratic.

They closed mass by singing the Trinitarian hymn “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name” (I think it had been altered to “your name” in the missalette), perhaps a final appeal for the new name. Here, as with the rest of the music, I noticed the main flaw in this church: its organ. That’s a problem a lot of Catholic churches have; they try to sing resounding anthems to the accompaniment of a wimpy synthesizer. Almost every time we have mass at Garrigan I groan when they haul out an ultra-expensive synthesizer that our music department purchased a few years ago. Expensive as it is, it still sounds like a synthesizer, not an organ. (I’d really rather they used a real piano like they used to use at mass; that sounds better.) At bacalaureate we sang the mighty old British hymn “The Holy Anthem” (Alleluia! Alleluia! Let the holy anthem rise; let the choirs of heaven chant it in the temple of the skies! Let the mountains skip with gladness and the joyful valleys ring with hosannas in the highest to our savior and our king!...) It’s a gorgeous and powerful hymn that should be belted out to grand accompaniment so it really does rise to the heavens; a synthesizer simply can’t do it justice. They had that same problem here as “Holy God” came across as sappy instead of stately and reverent. It made me extremely thankful that my little old church has a century-old organ with ceiling-high pipes that treats the hymns the way they should be. Hopefully the new merged parish in Fairview Heights will get a better organ. Unless they buy a clone of the one in the new cathedral in Los Angeles, though, it probably won’t be anything special; almost no new church’s organ seems to be.

[In writing this revision I checked out the website of Holy Trinity Parish. The two churches (the other was Assumption rather than Immaculate Conception) officially merged in 2004, but the new church building wasn’t finished until 2007. In the interim they held mass first in the gymnasium of a public junior high and later at a local convention center. I also checked out the website of St. Clair Square, the mall that was adjacent to (and now includes the site of) St. Albert’s. I have no idea how big it was in 2003, but it’s certainly a huge shopping center today—with four department stores (they’re proud of Illinois’ largest Dillard’s store) and just about every shop you’ve ever seen in any mall anywhere.]

After church we drove into the city and headed to our last tourist destination, the brewery. This was probably one instance when it was good to have come from a Catholic school—it’s not like any of our parents will be complaining about the kids touring a beer factory. Indeed, this Fathers’ Day most of the boys were scouring the gift shop for things they knew their dads would like.



David Burrow, wearing a High Desert Mavericks cap

That gift shop is actually one of the highlights of the brewery. They have everything you could imagine with a beer logo on it, and they sell it all dirt cheap. My bet is that almost everything here is priced at or just slightly above cost. That makes sense, since everything in the store is essentially advertising for Anheuser-Busch. It’s amazing, though, that that same advertising sells for “designer” prices in department stores.

I had an interesting experience in the gift shop. I was wearing a baseball cap from the High Desert Mavericks, the minor league team my former student (and former quiz bowl player) Brad Nelson plays for. I chose specifically to wear it, because I knew that this weekend Brad would be back in the line-up after being out two months after wrist surgery. As I was browsing through the gift shop, a man stopped and asked “Is that a High Desert cap?” and then asked if I was from Adelanto, the town where the team plays. It turned out that the man and his wife live in Silver Lakes, the same development where Brad and some of his teammates live. They’re Mavericks season ticket-holders, but the last thing they expected was to see a High Desert fan in St. Louis. I guess it really is a small world.

Even if you’re not a real beer drinker, the Anheuser-Busch brewery is a fascinating place to visit. It’s basically an industrial tour, of course, but it really is interesting. In addition to showing you all the various steps involved in brewing beer, they also take visitors through the ornate stables where they keep the famous Clydesdale horses. Things end up, of course, in a tasting room. Supervising a group of minors and having a long drive ahead of me, I chose to join the kids in having soft drinks instead of the brewery’s own products. **[I returned to the A—B brewery last year with another group of quiz bowl kids, the first time I’d been there since Anheuser-Busch was bought out by the Belgian conglomerate In-Bev. The tour wasn’t nearly so interesting this time. It’s much more limited and less informative. These days they seem concerned that anything they show you might reveal trade secrets.]**

We made our way out to the airport on I-70. We had a late lunch (around 2pm) near the airport at one of the northernmost outposts of that definitive Southern chain, Waffle House. As I waited for my food to come, I pondered a mathematical error they have in the Waffle House menu. The menu says you can order your hash browns in well over a million different ways. (I don’t remember the exact number, and it doesn’t matter—since it was wrong.) In addition to being “scattered” on the grill, Waffle House hash browns can be ordered “smothered” with onions, “covered” with cheese, “chunked” with ham bits, “topped” with chili, “diced” with tomato, and/or “peppered” with jalapenos. The menu suggests you order them “all the way”, i.e. with everything; I prefer mine “chunked and covered”. As someone who teaches probability, it was not hard to figure out that there are actually 2^6 or 64. Even if you consider a single, double, or triple order as an additional option, that would still make just 192 different choices—quite a few, but a far cry from a million. The only way I can get a number close to theirs would be if you cared what order the toppings went in (whether the chili was on top of the cheese, or vice versa), which I don’t think is an option. I’d love to have someone explain where that million plus number came from. **[I make a point of including this in my Statistics classes these days. Whenever it comes up, I can always tell those people who have been to the South, because they recognize Waffle House.]**

We went west on I-70 to US 61 and then headed north on Avenue of the Saints. Our last stop in Missouri was at a really skuzzy fireworks stand, where a couple of the boys picked up fairly innocuous (if not strictly legal) souvenirs. **[Fortunately, I've managed to abandon this tradition in recent years.]** We continued north into Iowa and drove on north to Cedar Rapids, where I stopped for gas on 33rd Avenue. We made our way on past Waterloo and on to Clear Lake, where we stopped one last time—this time for a restroom break and a quick bite of dinner. We finally made it back to Algona about 9:30.

I had a nasty little surprise once we got home. As I backed up my car to pull it closer to the suburban, I noticed that one of the tires was flat. The tires were all but new (I'd had a flat tire New Years Day and gotten a whole new set at that time), so I was far from happy. One of the boys tried to help me take the old tire off so we could put on a spare, but no matter how hard we wrestled with it, the old tire wouldn't come off. Eventually we just gave up. The kid left, and I drove the suburban home, figuring I'd try again in sunlight. The next day two of the janitors and I worked to get the tire off. We wrestled with it for nearly twenty minutes before it finally gave way. Eventually it did, though, and I put on the spare. I quickly went to a tire place and got the flat fixed. Apparently I'd run over a nail. I finally went home for good and went on with the rest of the summer.