

CHRISTMAS IN NEW MEXICO ❄️ ❄️ ❄️ 1996



Josh, Hannah, and Michelle Burrow, with David Burrow and Margaret Sullivan – Thoreau, New Mexico – Christmas, 1996

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

There's a blizzard warning outside today; it's 7 below, and the wind's whipping around at 40 miles per hour. While Christmas is past now, there's nothing like these white-out conditions to make me re-ignite the holiday spirit. So, I'll take the opportunity of this snow day to tell the tale of our Christmas journey to the Southwest. **[As I revise this in mid-November, we've had our first winter storm of the season, so again it's appropriate to get into the holiday spirit.]**

This was the first time in my adult life that I've traveled far away from home at Christmas **[something I've since done repeatedly]**. Now, by the standards of government statistics, I've made a "major trip" almost every Christmas, but then they think that 100 miles is a major trip. I've gone that far on a whim lots of times. This, though, was really a **major** trip; my sister Margaret and I would travel over a thousand miles each way from Iowa to my brother's house in New Mexico.

This was also the first time ever that I've been outside of the Midwest at the holidays **[again the first of several such occasions]**. I really didn't know what to expect with regard to weather, scenery, or much of anything. This was really the first time I'd traveled anywhere other than in the summer. It would definitely be a new experience.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 21

ALGONA IOWA TO MARYVILLE MISSOURI
(approximately 245 miles)

The high school dismissed for the holidays yesterday, but I still had to work this morning. This fall I taught an algebra class at Iowa Lakes Community College on Saturday mornings. Today it was time for the final, so I drove over to Emmetsburg to earn my keep.

I teach over the Iowa Lakes television system, with students in five area towns. My lone Emmetsburg student had already taken his test, so I spent the morning chatting with the camera operator while the students at the other centers finished their work.

[They've since updated the ILCC TV system, and now I originate most of my classes from right here in Algona. Among other things, that saves the college a fortune in mileage reimbursement. It also allows them in many cases to have the instructor where the bulk of students are—which for night and weekend courses is almost never the “main” campuses at Emmetsburg and Estherville. I was delighted when they made that change. I drove far too many times in questionable weather, sometimes on roads that were officially closed, to teach one or two (or for one full semester zero) students live and a dozen or more back where I came from.]

Since grades were due before the college offices would be open again, I had the proctors at each center fax the answer sheets for their tests to me in Emmetsburg. I was relieved when everything came through clearly on the fax, even though most of it had a pink stripe across the page indicating that the machine was almost out of paper. **[This would, of course, be the old-fashioned heat-sensitive fax technology. The faxes they have these days at Iowa Lakes are analogous to laser printers. What's more, these days we report our grades online, and the advent of the internet allows the deadline to be a bit later than it once was.]**



**Margaret Sullivan's and David Burrow's cars
Algona, Iowa**

After my class was over I drove back to Algona, tidied up my apartment, and waited just a short time for Margaret to show up. She had stopped in Mason City to exchange Christmas gifts with Paul and Nancy, and we spent quite a bit of time trying to get those gifts, as well as her and my gifts and luggage, arranged in the back of Margaret's car. This was complicated by the fact that the hatchback door to the car would not open. Margaret drives on several miles of gravel each day, and the combination of dust and ice had glued the door permanently shut. While it took some effort, we did manage to get everything in. I made one last check to make sure everything in the apartment was okay, and before long we were on our way.

[Another change since this was originally written is shown in the picture at left. Not only do I own a different—though similar—car, but now it stays in a garage. That makes it MUCH easier to start and keep the car running in winter.]

We had chosen to take Margaret's car on this trip because it is a bit larger than mine and it has slightly fewer miles on it. While I made numerous offers to help out, Margaret did **ALL** the driving on this trip. I can't say that I blame her; I think everyone feels more comfortable driving their own car than having someone else drive it. So, while I will repeatedly say things like "we drove" over the course of this travelogue; the honest truth is that **Margaret** drove, while I served as navigator and entertainment director.

Having said that, **WE** drove southward from Algona down US 169. Algona was deep in snow and most likely was guaranteed a white Christmas, but the snow started getting patchy just fifteen miles south at about the Humboldt County line. By the time we got to Fort Dodge (about 45 miles south of Algona), there was more bare ground than snow.

We stopped for gas and then had a late lunch at a new McDonalds right on the highway. This McDonalds is of particular interest to me, because it is owned by an Algona family and managed by one of my former students. **[It's weird to think of this McD's as “new”, but of course it was at some point. These days it seems as if it's been there forever. It's old enough that it's already been renovated. It's still owned by the Kasch family, though, as are several other McDonalds in northwest Iowa.]** Margaret had the crispy chicken deluxe sandwich. She described it to me, and it sounded good. I can't say I cared much for the Arch Deluxe, though, and I didn't feel like experimenting with one of its offspring. Instead I supported the Iowa pork industry with a McRib **[a sandwich that remains a once a year offering, though I'd guarantee they'd have a year-round market for them if they were available].**

After we had finished eating, I ordered some coffee to go. It seemed odd to me that the clerk poured it out of the orange-handled pot (the one usually reserved for decaf), but it wasn't strange enough that I asked about it. When we got to the car I took a sip of it, and I got a bit of a surprise. It wasn't decaf; in fact it wasn't coffee at all, but rather tea. Margaret offered to take the tea, and we went through the drive-through window to get a cup of “real” coffee. As it turned out, that was also tea. It wasn't a big enough problem to complain about, but it was certainly strange. The Kasches (owners/managers of this and several other McDonalds) were never the brightest people to graduate from Garrigan, but I did think they could tell the difference between coffee and tea. **[They, of course, have little to do with actually serving food, though.]**

We sipped our tea for quite a while as we drove southwest from Ft. Dodge. We headed west on highway 20 to Rockwell City, then turned south on highway 4. We passed through Lake City (which bills itself as having “everything but a lake”) and then skirted the wrong side of the tracks in Carroll **[an area that has since gotten nicer, mostly thanks to the development surrounding a new Wal-Mart supercenter.]** The light of afternoon faded away as we drove down US 71 through Audubon and Atlantic. We started seeing farm lights at the side of the road and houses with their rooflines outlined in Christmas lights. Eventually we passed Clarinda, and soon we crossed the border into Missouri.

Missouri gave us our first taste of "modern" speed limits. Last summer Congress allowed states to raise speed limits without losing their federal highway funds. So far in Iowa this has just meant that a few stretches of non-interstate four-lane highways have been changed from the traditional 55 to 65 miles per hour. Two-lanes in Iowa are still 55, and interstates are still 65. The same is true in Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, and the other states with which I have had much contact recently. To my mind those speed limits are fast enough, and I hope our legislature leaves well enough alone. Missouri would be the first state with "western" speed limits, which to my mind can be downright scary and dangerous. Highway 71 in Missouri is a narrow, winding road with deer warning signs all along it. I thought it was bad enough at 55mph, but now the speed limit is 60. While 60 may have been too fast for the conditions, it was the slowest speed limit we would see until we were back in Iowa again.

[Iowa two-lanes are still 55, though we've now raised the interstate speed limit to 70. I honestly don't care much for the 70 limit (and less for the 75 that states west of here have). I'm much more likely to speed on rural two-lanes, and personally I think it would make more sense to raise the limits on empty highways to 60 or 65 than having super-fast limits on jam-packed interstates.]

In the quest to drive faster, people seem to forget why the speed limit was lowered to begin with. Saving lives was a convenient by-product of driving slower; the real reason for the "double nickels" was that we use less gas when we drive slower. I very distinctly remember the energy crisis of the '70s, and common sense tells me that even though we may have postponed the time when we will run out of oil, we can't just use more and more without running out someday. It bothers me that so many of the cars today are enormous sport/utility vehicles that get horrible mileage. Most of them go down the roads nearly empty, hauling only their owner. People complain that gas prices have gone up, but actually gas costs exactly the same now as it did when I was in college (\$1.27⁹ here in Algona). I can't say I want to pay several dollars a gallon like they do in Europe, but maybe if we did people would think twice before they sped down the highway in vehicles that match the size of their egos.

[The energy crisis is back, of course, though we've got a temporary reprieve as I write this. Under President Bush gas prices soared to over four bucks a gallon, and I did notice people driving slower when that happened. This fall the price has gone back down to \$1.99⁹, and everybody's speeding down the road celebrating how "cheap" fuel is.]

Okay, enough of the editorial. Before long we came to Maryville, a town not much larger than Algona whose claim to fame is being the home of Northwest Missouri State University. We took the business route through town, coming in through the back door past trailer parks and run-down frame houses. It was interesting that even the poorest homes were all decked out for the holidays. We drove straight through downtown and then out a long strip at the south edge of town. Eventually we made it to the Super 8 Motel, our destination for the night.

Margaret parked the car, and I went to the office to check in. I had made reservations for the whole trip, but unfortunately they didn't have a record of them at this motel. On the plus side, the place was nearly empty, so there wasn't any problem getting a room. I thought there might be an additional complication, because I didn't have my Super 8 VIP card with me. The card gives a 10% discount off the standard rates. Oddly enough, the clerk didn't even ask to see the card. He just gave me the discount without a blink.

[I distinctly remember checking in at this motel. What made it particularly memorable was that the Super 8 shared a parking lot with a Comfort Inn. Check-in for both hotels was actually at the Comfort Inn. Having since stayed at numerous hotels, I've found that the desk clerks almost never care about having AAA or frequent travel cards. They'll basically give you a 10% discount for the asking, regardless of what identification you may have.]

We unpacked our luggage and then took off again, looking for a place to eat. We settled on the Golden Corral, a steakhouse we had seen on the strip. It turned out to be one of the strangest places either of us had ever eaten. The parking lot was packed, but we managed to find a place fairly close to the door. We went in, expecting to find a cafeteria line like you usually see in a steakhouse. Instead we saw a crowded dining room, with no clue as to whether we were supposed to seat ourselves or wait to be seated. The place looked like it used to be a fast food place and had been converted into a "real" restaurant. It had obviously served its current purpose for quite some time, though. The wallpaper was yellow and grease-stained. There was one festive touch, though. They had covered the artwork on the walls with wrapping paper to make them look like Christmas presents.

We waited for quite a while, and eventually a cashier told us we were supposed to go to the line. When we looked confused, she directed us to a narrow opening in a mirrored wall at the left side of the room. Beyond the wall was indeed the typical buffet line. Even it was weird, though. The first clerk we encountered had a menu board above her, so we volunteered the main course we wanted. This person, however, was only there to take our order for drinks. The next clerk did take our order. He was standing next to a cash register, so we started to get out money to pay. He assured us that we would pay at the door when we left. (Why he had a cash register, I still have no clue.)

We went to the non-smoking room and found what appeared to be the only free table in the place, a tiny table for two right next to the restrooms. It was so crowded that in order for me to sit at the table, I had to block the entrance to the restrooms. When someone wanted to use the restroom, I had to scoot up right next to the table. That in turn jostled everything (the table was none too steady), and at one point I spilled coffee all over. Margaret was even more cramped between the table and the wall. For her to get out (as when we went to the dessert bar), the people at the next table had to move. I'd love to know the legal rated capacity of the place; I'm positive they had to have exceeded it.

We both had a dinner salad with extra-thick sirloin steaks. The dinner came with a prepared salad, rather than salad bar. The salad wasn't bad, but it too added to the experience of the place. Rather than shredding the lettuce into bite-sized bits, they appeared to have taken a head of lettuce and basically quartered it. We each had a big chunk of lettuce with some other equally "super-sized"

vegetables (carrots, peppers, onions, and tomatoes more suited to a relish tray than a salad) piled around it. The salad was tasty (as was the steak), but it was certainly one of the strangest meals I've eaten in a long time.

We went back to the motel and watched *Early Edition* on TV. **[I'd completely forgotten about that show, which featured a guy who had ESP-like knowledge of events that would happen the next day.]** Once it was over, we flipped through stations until we came across one of the strangest programs I've seen in a long time. It was on The Learning Channel, one of those cable networks that shows nothing but dated documentaries, mostly from Australia. This program followed contestants on the "Little Miss" pageant circuit and their parents. I'd heard about these little girl beauty contests when I was in Mississippi (one of the places they are particularly popular), but I guess I never really believed they actually existed. Well, apparently they do, and if you ask me the whole idea is downright scary. Mothers spend a fortune to make their pre-school daughters look like streetwalkers. They dress them up in slinky clothes and cake their faces with more make-up than a country music star would wear. They force these poor children to "sing" (at least that's what they call it) adult songs and strut around as if they were showing off their figures. Margaret made the comment that it's no wonder there are child molesters when people put their children on display as sex objects.

I felt sorry for the children, but I had no time whatsoever for the parents who were involved in the pageant circuit. They displayed some of the worst sportsmanship I've ever seen. The children themselves seemed to take both winning and losing graciously and matter-of-factly. Each mother, however, just couldn't imagine that her little darling could possibly be anything other than number one. They blamed the judges, they accused other children of cheating, and they even criticized their own daughters for not trying hard enough to win. That's a horrible burden to put on a four-year-old. Our society must really be getting pretty warped when these women really think they are loving mothers who are doing what's best for their children. **[Of course, the documentary makers probably selected these particular women because they were so colorful.]**

While all this was going on in the background, I started grading my tests from Iowa Lakes. Grades for my Statistics class were due Monday, so I had to make sure mine were ready. The tests were easy enough to grade, and then I scanned through the semester projects the students had done. I can't say I paid them as much attention as I probably should have, but then the projects were largely graded by completion anyway. Only serious problems counted off from the grade, and those I couldn't help but notice—even as I graded them while half asleep.

Eventually I got all my Statistics grades done. I had brought along a fax machine that I use in my work for the Iowa Council of Teachers of Mathematics. I managed to unplug the motel phone and stretch its little cord to the limit in order to plug in the fax machine. I had picked up one of those pre-paid calling cards at Wal-Mart, and I dialed my life away to get through to the fax at the ILCC registrar's office. Amazingly everything worked like a charm, and eleven pages of grades went through without a hitch.

I avoided doing the longest and most boring part of my grades—the book assignments from Elementary Algebra. Because it was a weekend class, the Algebra grades weren't due until the beginning of January, so I was able to procrastinate and not worry about them until I got back to Iowa. **[I think this was probably the last time I assigned "homework" for a grade in one of my college classes. I always make assignments, but as most math professors do, the book serves as a learning tool, and the grade is almost exclusively from tests.]** Once the grades were done, I settled into bed, and before long I went to sleep.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 22

MARYVILLE MISSOURI TO TUCUMCARI NEW MEXICO

(approximately 700 miles)

I got to sleep quickly, but I can't say I slept well. I woke up repeatedly during the night, and it was still quite early when both Margaret and I were awake for good. We got packed fairly quickly (with things arranged better than they had been the day before), and the sun had not yet risen when we were on our way.

I picked up some newspapers before we left. They had three newspapers for sale in Maryville. One was the local daily; I picked up Friday's edition. They also had the Des Moines *Register*, which seemed sort of strange in another state. I passed on that and instead picked up the Omaha *World Herald*. To add to the confusion of which state we were in, this was the Iowa edition of a Nebraska newspaper, on sale in Missouri. What seemed really strange was that they didn't have the Kansas City *Star*, even though Kansas City is by far the nearest city of importance to Maryville. I pondered that as we drove southward toward K.C.

Because the radio and tape deck on Margaret's car didn't work properly, I had brought along a portable tape player (one of the smallest I've ever seen—it was about twice the size of a cassette tape, with the tape deck in the center and one speaker on each side). **[I loved that tape player, but it eventually died. These days they don't seem to make anything remotely similar, even as a CD or .mp3 player. Everything is either designed to be used for headphones or comes with speakers built into a bulky case.]** Both Margaret and I brought along a collection of Christmas tapes, and we passed a lot of time on this trip listening to many of them. This morning stands out, because we were listening to my audio tape of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas", the soundtrack of the animated TV special. It's fascinating to hear that story, but not see it; it forces you to use your imagination. We were definitely entertained by Boris Karloff's rendition of the immortal Dr. Seuss poem, and it woke us up to start the day. **[It's been a holiday tradition ever since to listen to that "Grinch" tape.]**

We stopped for gas and coffee in Savannah, Missouri, just north of St. Joseph. In a garbage can beside the gas pumps they had a whole stack of yesterday's Kansas City *Stars*. I rescued one of them, and added reading the news to our day's entertainment.

We got on I-29 and drove past St. Joseph and then around Kansas City (on I-435). St. Joseph to me seems much larger than its 72,000 population, while on the beltway we barely knew we were in a city at all in Kansas City. Before long we crossed into the Sunflower State, picked up a ticket at the tollbooth, and headed westward along the Kansas Turnpike.

We pulled off at the Lawrence service area to have breakfast. By now it was actually breakfast time, but there really wasn't much of a crowd as we enjoyed our coffee and biscuits at Hardees. I picked up some papers—the Sunday paper from Topeka and a Black newspaper called the Kansas State *Globe*—and before long we were back on our way down the turnpike.

As you might guess, I spent quite a bit of our driving time reading through the papers. I'd scan the headlines, and when something sounded interesting to Margaret, I'd read the article aloud. The Maryville paper had about as much news as you'd expect in a town no one has ever heard of. The big front-page feature was on a Hispanic family that was spending their first Christmas in Missouri. Inside they had a press release (that was passed off as real news) from a bank about a new service where they returned reduced photocopies of cancelled checks, instead of the checks themselves. This wasn't an option; they required all their customers to "take advantage" of this service. You couldn't get your actual checks back if you wanted to. **[Pretty much every bank has gone to that "service"—and you usually have to pay for even that. Most banks these days would prefer that you get your statement and see your cancelled checks online.]**

In both Omaha and Topeka the big news was Christmas shopping. Today was supposed to be the biggest shopping day of the season (not the day after Thanksgiving, as I had always thought), and they had sent reporters to the malls to track the crowds. There were both national reports (from stores in New Jersey and California) and local interviews with managers at the local Target and Penney's stores.

The *Globe* was the most interesting papers I picked up this morning. I never really think of Kansas as a heavily minority state, although it does surpass the national proportions for both Blacks and Hispanics. **[These days, of course, EVERY state has a rapidly growing Hispanic population. What is unique in Kansas is a fairly large number of small-town blacks.]** Being minority-owned, the *Globe* gave a very different slant on the news than you get in most newspapers. One of the most interesting parts was a lengthy editorial that strongly criticized the school board in Oakland, California, for recognizing "Ebonics" (supposedly short for "Ebony phonics" and meaning "Black English") as a second language, distinct from English. The editorial noted that while black people do not have a monopoly on bad grammar, "the double standards prevailing in today's America require that a black person involved in public communication must display superior communication skills." It went on to say that blacks should "avoid the trap of using 'down home talk'," but should instead use standard English at all times. The author then gave nine tips on correct usage for frequently misused words and phrases (lie vs. lay, between vs. among, etc.). The article concluded: "Language usage indicates educational level, communication skill, and social class. Don't talk like Porgy, Amos, Sinbad, Aretha, or James Brown. Talk like Renee Pussaint, Oprah Winfrey, Lyn Vaughn, Bernard Shaw, Ed Bradley, or other good models. Get a grammar book."

I felt like shouting "Amen, brother!" as I read that editorial. While I have no doubt that the Oakland school had good intentions, their plan (at least as it has been presented in newspapers) appears to trap students in a ghetto. "Ebonics" may be an acceptable dialect in an all-black neighborhood, but it is (I think quite rightly) considered careless and inferior in broader society. It bothers me that even many linguists consider all varieties of English to be equally "correct". Slang is slang—whether it is spoken by Black Americans, White Midwesterners, Southerners, Cockneys, Australians, or the royal family. I learned in school that there are levels of language; one must match the level used with the audience that is addressed in a given situation. We were also told that one is never wrong to use correct (or "standard") English. The audience will understand correct speech, even if their primary level is lower. That made sense to me twenty years ago, and it still makes sense today. We need to live as ONE society, and we need to teach every member of that society to function effectively in it.

[I will be fascinated to see if having a black President changes the standard for "appropriate" communication in the black community. I hope so. ... And even if it doesn't, Barack Obama is a far better model of good language for the country as a whole than his predecessor was.]

As we drove southward it grew foggier and foggier. Central Kansas is really quite scenic, but you certainly wouldn't have known that today. Around Emporia we could barely see the road, let alone the countryside. For a break from the fog, we stopped at the Matfield service area. I threw out some of the papers, and we took a short break to use the restroom and get some coffee. They had a machine that let you smash pennies to make tokens with a tornado design. Margaret and I each smashed a penny (at a cost of 51¢ each) for a cheap souvenir of Kansas. There was also a gift shop here that had some interesting items, mostly with a "Wizard of Oz" theme. Most likely I'd have bought something, but they were closed. Refreshed by the stop, we got back in the car and headed south to Wichita.

As we neared Kansas' largest city, I fished around for the ticket we had gotten when we entered the turnpike. I looked under my seat and behind it, and I searched through my backpack and in the bags of Christmas tapes. The ticket was nowhere to be found. When we got to the exit, there was a sign saying that lost tickets paid the maximum fare (\$6.75). Fortunately for us, that is what we would have paid anyhow, since we got on at the farthest possible point on the turnpike. We paid the money and set out west on US 54.

For a city that is larger than Des Moines, Wichita is incredibly easy to get through. Highway 54 runs arrow straight east to west through the city. On the east side of town is a shopping strip, but there are very few lights, and access roads and turning lanes keep the traffic flowing smoothly. Just east of downtown the highway becomes limited access, and we went straight through the city center and out to the west end of the city in no time flat.

We stopped for gas just beyond Wichita, at the town of Goddard. I can't say for sure, but the town just might be named after the famous rocket scientist; Wichita's main industry is aerospace, after all. Here I got my first taste of a peculiarity of Margaret's that bothered me, although probably not for any good reason. Margaret had her lights on as we drove through the fog, and when we stopped for gas, she left them on. She turned off the car, filled the tank, used the restroom, and shopped in the convenience store—all with her lights on. I've had more than my share of troubles with car batteries over the years, and I was truly amazed that the car started right up when we were ready to go again. I found out that this was the rule, not the exception with Margaret. She says that in brightly lit gas stations, she sometimes forgets to turn her lights on when she leaves, so she leaves them on so they'll be on when she's out on the highway again. I guess I figure someone will flash their lights at me if I forget to turn mine on, but I want to make sure the car will start when it's time to leave.

I bought "gourmet" coffee at the gas station (there's a contradiction, if I ever saw one), as well as Wichita's Sunday paper. They had another version of the "biggest shopping day" article, as well as giving the odds Wichita would have a white Christmas. Those odds were pretty remote. Wichita is farther south than Richmond and Louisville. According to the paper, they've had snow for the holidays only three times this century. The forecast for this Christmas was for cloudy skies and temperatures in the 60s.

Seventy-five miles west of Wichita we came to the town of Pratt. Pratt is almost exactly the size of Algona, and even though it's just about the only real town in the area, it still isn't much of a town. We did find a pleasant (and crowded) McDonalds next to the local Wal-Mart, where we had a late lunch of quarter-pounders and fries.

Needless to say, I picked up a copy of the Pratt newspaper. It's one of those dailies that really doesn't have any news in it—much like the Mt. Pleasant News. This was Friday's edition, and the big story was that a woman in a nearby town was converting an abandoned drugstore into an alcohol-free teen center (as if there were a teen center where alcohol was permitted). The idea is a good one, but from the article it sounded as if her place was a bit too squeaky clean (with foosball and air hockey being the big entertainment, and networks like MTV blocked on the television) to appeal to most of today's kids.

I also bought the Hutchinson Sunday paper, which wasn't much (in about the same league as the Ft. Dodge *Messenger*). They had the single worst "Christmas crowds at the mall" piece we encountered. It was an AP story written by some woman with a hyphenated name whose language skills make Ebonics seem like the Queen's English. Ms. Something-Something seemed only able to write in superlatives, and I think she must have been paid by the adjective. The piece read more like a romance novel than a newspaper article.

Another interesting feature told of a San Francisco company that was getting rich re-dressing and re-packaging the traditional Barbie Doll. They said they were bringing Barbie closer to the "real world", with semi-scandalous new designs. Probably most interesting was "Trailer Trash Barbie", which had dark roots under her platinum hair, dangled a cigarette from her lips, and slung a kid on her hip. That's not quite the image Mattel would choose to project for their doll, but it did make for an interesting article. **[This year they apparently have a "Caribou Barbie" based on Sarah Palin.]**

We drove and drove and drove across southwest Kansas. Kansas is certainly not the most boring place in America (that was yet to come), but it sure ain't nothing to write home about. The land is gently rolling, with the emphasis on "gently". It's farm country, but the farms are significantly larger than they are in Iowa. The strangest thing was that in December they were harvesting some of the fields, while others were green with new growth.

We sped through all of this at roughly the legal speed limit of 65mph. Traffic was fairly heavy, and much of it did a good 10mph faster than that. The road avoided every town, but every 15 miles or so we'd pass one. It was still somewhat foggy, but even through the haze we could see the water towers and grain elevators rising from the countryside for five miles or more before we actually came to each town.

Eventually we reached Liberal, in the extreme southwest corner of Kansas. Liberal is one of those places with a funny name I've always wanted to visit, probably because the concept of "Liberal, Kansas" seems like an oxymoron to me. Now that I've been to Liberal, I won't be hurrying back soon. It's a seedy town to say the least. There are bad parts and worse parts, but there don't really seem to be any good parts of town. The whole place is run-down and dirty, and its only purpose for existence seems to be that it's the largest thing between Wichita and the West.

We stopped at a seedy gas station on the west edge of Liberal. It was interesting that all the customers except us were Hispanic (we are at the door of the Southwest here), but the clerk was a very rude Anglo woman. Odder still was the set-up by the bathrooms. One door said "men" and another "women", while two others were numbered "1" and "2". Margaret suspected they were showers, but from the overall appearance of the place (let's just say it was one of those places with vending machines in the men's room), I suspect they rented "1" and "2" by the hour.

I had left my toothbrush at home, so I picked up a "travel-pak" at this gas station. It combined a miniature toothbrush, 25 feet of dental floss (most of the rolls you see in stores are 100 **yards**), and a miniature tube of toothpaste. The cost: \$3.97—probably the biggest rip-off of the trip. I also picked up a copy of the Liberal paper, but you'll probably be glad to know I don't remember anything from it except yet another of those "Christmas at the mall" stories.

We soon crossed into Oklahoma. That made it seem like we were making progress, even though we still had quite a long distance to go. We didn't notice much difference between Kansas and Oklahoma except that the road got worse and we now went through towns instead of around them.

We stopped for gas in the town of Guymon (I still don't know how to pronounce that name), which is the seat of Texas County and the largest town in the Oklahoma panhandle. Together with the gas station was a combination Taco Bell and TCBY yogurt shop. Combining fast food with gas still seems strange to me (although it's becoming quite common these days); this particular combination seemed even stranger. **[It is indeed strange, given that different companies franchise the two brands.]** We refreshed ourselves with waffle cones. They were featuring egg nog and praline pecan flavors, and I can verify that they were most tasty.

As we drove through Oklahoma and on into Texas we saw the most gorgeous sunset. It was centered in front of us in the southwest, but it seemed to wrap around and fill the whole sky with color. Most fascinating was the fact that it seemed to last forever. We drove for more than an hour and a half before the last glimpses of red faded into night. It was definitely a sunset I'll not soon forget. **[This really was one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen, and certainly the nicest one I've seen in winter. It made me wonder if such sunsets are typical in the southwest—something I still can't verify.]**

I said earlier that Kansas was not the most boring place in America. That honor has to be claimed by the Texas panhandle. This is beef country, with the huge ranches broken up only by the occasional finishing lot. The land is unforgivingly flat and wide open, with almost nothing to break the horizon. The road shoots straight southwestward, pausing only for three insignificant towns. The largest of these is Dalhart, an overgrown bump in the road that features such exciting businesses as a store housed in a seedy mobile home that sells nothing but cigarettes. At Dalhart a sign warns that it is approximately 50 miles to the next services. Such signs are not uncommon in the West, but the sense of distance is driven home by the fact that those services happen to be located in another state.

The most entertaining thing about Texas was that state's use of reflectors along the road. Trees are so rare in this "great American desert" that they seem to treat them with special honor. Each tree at the side of the highway is marked with reflectors. There are usually two: one as a warning before you get to the tree and another right in front of the tree. As these specks of orange flashed at us, Margaret and I debated whether the state was using the reflectors to protect the trees or the drunks. I'm sure the latter are much less endangered in Texas.

Texas has a day/night speed limit, like we used to see on roads in Iowa when I was growing up. The day speed (shown in black on white on the signs) is 70 mph, while the night speed (shown in white on black) is 60. Whoever came up with those speed limits made one goof, though. When Iowa used to have the day/night system, the day signs were made of non-reflective material. The idea was that at night they disappeared, so the driver's attention was focused on the night speed. Here in Texas both the day and night speeds reflect, and the day sign—being mostly white—comes across as brighter and more important than the night one. Margaret seemed to compromise between the two, as she cruised down the highway at around 65 mph.

As we drove we listened to Christmas music on my tape player. We heard tape after tape: Burl Ives, John Denver and the Muppets, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir each singing their renditions of the holiday favorites. Then there was Harry Belafonte, whose voice was somehow of the wrong timbre for the cheap speakers on my tape player. On his (and only his) songs, the speakers fluttered and sounded as if they were shorting out. That's too bad, since Belafonte really has a lovely voice. **[Belafonte has caused the same problem on other sound systems I've had, too—including the speakers on the computer I'm typing on now.]**

We had a sense of almost being there when we crossed the line from Texas into New Mexico. It helped that in crossing the line we also gained an hour by entering the Mountain Time Zone. Margaret, who has driven this road before, tells me that the scenery improves dramatically in New Mexico. It was well into the evening when we got here, so other than the fact that the road started curving and going up and down, I can't say I really noticed much for scenery.

Nothing, that is, until we neared Tucumcari. This town of 6,000 appears to exist mostly as a service center for tourists. We'd find out later that Tucumcari isn't much to look at by day, but entering it at night, it really looks spectacular. Tucumcari spreads out in a valley near the Canadian River. As we drove in on U.S. 54, we overlooked the town, and lights seemed to spread out forever across the desert. Tucumcari is the size of Algona, but at night it looks larger than Mason City.

As we neared Tucumcari the sea of street lights started to surround us, and then we noticed the Christmas lights. There was nothing pushy or overly elaborate, but lots of tasteful decorations. In particular it seemed that almost everybody had outlined their roof in lights and those fortunate enough to have trees in their yards had lit up the trees for the holidays. It really made a lovely welcome to the town.

The sight was probably most spectacular because Tucumcari was our destination for the evening. This is another of those places with a funny name that have always been on my "must visit" list. I first became familiar with the place in the board game "Rail Baron" that our family would play when I was growing up. In the game, as in its actual history, Tucumcari was a major rail junction in the middle of nowhere. Its location basically marks the end of the Great Plains and the beginning of the true desert.

Tucumcari (TOO-come-carry) prospers today because it's the only place of size between Amarillo to the east and Albuquerque to the west. North/south, it's one of the few places of significance between Wichita and El Paso. Ever since the days of old Route 66, the town has gotten rich off the tourist trade. Like Coralville, it proudly boasts of its numerous motels, restaurants, and gas stations. Signs for 500 miles in all directions proudly proclaim "Tucumcari Tonight". We, too, were headed for Tucumcari tonight. Our destination was the Super 8 Motel, located right on Historic 66 at the east edge of town.

The motel had the "No vacancy" sign lit when we drove up, which was understandable given that it was roughly 9pm even in this time zone. Fortunately they did have our reservations in order this time, and we checked in with no problem. I used the Wal-Mart card to call Steve and let him know we had made it to New Mexico. We made arrangements to meet at the Albuquerque airport the

next day, as Steve's stepson Chris was scheduled to fly in from Iowa. We said our "hasta la vistas" (this is New Mexico, after all), and then Margaret and I went out to find some dinner.

Our motel was part of an enormous development of tourist services at the easternmost Tucumcari exit. Across the street was a Holiday Inn, and we decided to try out their restaurant for supper. That was an excellent decision. The Branding Iron was a lovely restaurant, with excellent service and tasty food. While the name sounds like a steakhouse, their menu tended toward traditional Southwestern cuisine. Throughout the dinner we pondered the ethnicity of our waiter, a very pleasant man who was extremely helpful. He pronounced the names of Mexican dishes with an excellent Spanish accent, but he didn't really look Hispanic. To me he appeared to be south Asian—from India or Pakistan—but he also might have been a member of any of the scores of Indian tribes that call New Mexico home. One way or another, he was a good waiter.

After dinner we returned to the Super 8. I needed to get a bag out of the car, so I went out to the parking lot. A police car was parked with its lights off at a gas station next door to the motel. The cop eyed me very suspiciously as I fumbled around, but seemed satisfied when I actually dug out a key that unlocked the door. I have no idea what the crime rate is in Tucumcari **[most likely quite high, like it is everywhere in this part of the country]**, but I must say it was reassuring to see the police patrolling the motel strip.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23

TUCUMCARI, NEW MEXICO TO THOREAU, NEW MEXICO

(approximately 300 miles)

One of the strangest things about Tucumcari is what an early town it is. While some places seem to sleep in late, Tucumcari is up and running before the crack of dawn. Once again neither Margaret nor I slept terribly well; I think the excitement of travel kept both of us revved up. It was still dawn when I first looked out, but already most of the cars in the parking lot were gone. By the time we had breakfast, we were just about the only people left in the place. I found out later that the motel's breakfast bar opened at 4am. We pondered why the travelers should be on their way so early. Part of the reason is that Tucumcari is so close to a different time zone. Leaving at 6am Mountain Time is equivalent to leaving at 7am Central Time. Beyond that, there's not really much to keep a visitor in Tucumcari. Aside from the tourist strips, it's just like every other dumpy little Western town. You can eat and sleep, but once you've done that, you might as well move on. None of that, though, explains why anyone would want to be up at 4am **[particularly in winter]**.

We watched a bit of television this morning. In particular we watched Galavisión, a Spanish-language cable network. They were doing an excellent morning news show that would put "Today" or "Good Morning, America" to shame. It was much more news and much less fluff than its English counterparts. I was most intrigued to see the commercials, most of which were Spanish-dubbed versions of those same call-in offers for books, records, cosmetics, and psychic services that you see on every other cable network.

We went out for a short walk to find a place for a real breakfast and were surprised at just how chilly it was. We were in the sunny South (the same latitude as Memphis), but it was downright cold this morning. There were puddles at the side of the road (where sidewalks would be in civilized country), and they were frozen over with ice. I found out later on the Weather Channel that it was 19 degrees outside, with a wind chill below zero. I was glad to have brought along my warm Yankees Starter jacket. **[still my main winter coat all these years later]**, To give a clue of the crazy climate here, though, by afternoon they were expecting a high in the 60s.

Our original plan was to have breakfast at a Howard Johnson's near our motel. This particular Howard Johnson's turned out to be just a motel, not a restaurant. **[This would be right about when the HoJo restaurant chain was starting to fold. I found out recently on the Food Network that there are exactly three Howard Johnson's restaurants left, all of them in Massachusetts or New York state, within about fifty miles of Albany. This information came from Rachel Ray, whose credentials include having worked every job in a HoJo's that her parents owned.]** There were several nearby restaurants, but the only one that was actually open for breakfast was the one at the Holiday Inn. That was a bit more elegant than we wanted for breakfast **[though it probably would have had a breakfast buffet that wouldn't have been a bad bet]**, so we decided to try elsewhere.

It was still relatively early when we checked out of the motel, but the maids had already stripped the beds in every other room in our hallway. We packed the car and drove down Historic 66 looking for a place to eat. There were surprisingly few choices. After driving to the west end of town and back again, we decided on a "ma 'n' pa" restaurant in the downtown area. Really it was more of a "ma 'n' ma" restaurant. The menu told us that the proprietors were named Yvonne and Yvette, who turned out to be two slightly overweight ladies with a "hi, y'all" drawl. From the street the place looked like a hole-in-the-wall cafe, but it turned out to be an enormous restaurant that was tastefully decorated in dark woods with holiday trimmings everywhere. We had a lovely mountain view out the window by our table as we enjoyed delicious food. What's more, the prices were unbelievably low. I had an omelette breakfast that would have cost almost \$7 at a place like Perkins. Here the whole thing was less than \$4. Everything on the menu seemed to have a price from yesteryear.

We had a leisurely breakfast and then set out on our way. We were in no particular hurry, since we didn't need to be in Albuquerque until early afternoon. So, as we drove down I-40, we exited frequently and explored some of the little towns along the way. We stopped at a Stuckey's in Montoya, we followed Historic 66 as it wound through Santa Rosa, and we checked out a minimall in Moriarty. Mostly we were looking for a department store where we could pick up some sort of Christmas gifts for the exchange students who were staying with Steve and Terry. Unfortunately the only one we saw all morning was a pathetic little K-Mart just down the street from our motel in Tucumcari. **[At least at this point, the smaller towns in New Mexico didn't even have the standard Wal-Mart's.]**

It was easy to chart our progress as we exited and re-entered the interstate. An enormous rig hauling an extra-wide mobile home was also headed westward on I-40. We would pass it, exit, re-pass it, leave the highway again, and then pass it yet again. It was like an amusing little game of cat and mouse.

It would have been more amusing, except for the fierce wind that was blowing this morning. We fought strong gusts all day, but it was downright dangerous when cliffs or big vehicles (like trucks or the mobile home rig) caused sudden changes in the wind. We had a clue as to how strong the winds were when we stopped in Moriarty. Most of you know that Margaret has long, straight hair that falls below her shoulders. As we were walking around in Moriarty, we happened to see Margaret's reflection in a store window. The wind had caught her hair, and it was standing literally straight up.

Moriarty is part of an area just east of Albuquerque that is very much in transition. It apparently used to be a small mining town, but it's fast on its way to becoming an exclusive suburb. The local paper lamented a huge increase in crime and provided lengthy tips on how to keep homes safe. In addition to property crime, they noted a major problem was water theft. People would go into subdivisions that had been excavated but not yet developed and tap into the water mains. Among other problems, this was interfering with pressure in the fire hydrants. I never really thought of water as something one would steal, but it is a precious commodity here in the desert.

A large volume of newsprint was also devoted to the topic of luminarias, the traditional Christmas lights of the Southwest. While Algona's residents think of "luminarias" as lit-up plastic milk jugs, down here they keep the real tradition alive. People put sand or gravel in the bottom of paper grocery bags and then illuminate the bags with candles. The newspaper mentioned three different companies that were donating sand to people who wanted to make luminarias; there were stockpiles throughout the area where people could pick up their free sand. They also mentioned youth groups and service clubs that were making elaborate displays of luminarias. For instance, one 4-H club was lining the entire length of Route 66 in Moriarty (about four miles) with those paper-bag lanterns.



Before long we reached Albuquerque proper. The big thing I remember about Albuquerque from when I was out here before is traffic. Margaret had exactly the same memory, and the place certainly did not disappoint us today. Albuquerque has about 400,000 people, with a metro area just a bit bigger than that. Unfortunately it has grown from a sleepy backwater to a major city quite recently, and the local highway system hasn't kept pace with the growth. Two major, busy interstates intersect in downtown Albuquerque, and the combination of through traffic and local traffic is overpowering. Unlike major cities in the East, South, or Midwest, there's really no way you can avoid Albuquerque. There just aren't very many roads out here; if you want to avoid the city you have to drive literally hundreds of miles out of your way (as we would find out when we left New Mexico at the end of the week). **[The place desperately needs a beltway!]**

As I said, the traffic did not disappoint. The interstate speed limit in New Mexico is 75mph, and in the eastern suburbs the locals sailed along at 80. Then, out of nowhere, everyone slammed on the brakes. For almost five miles the interstate was little more than a parking lot, with stop-and-go traffic, but a lot more stop than go. There had been several accidents, both on I-40 and on the feeder ramps. That, combined with the maze of spaghetti where two interstates intersect, backed up traffic all the way through the east side of the city. We had gotten to Albuquerque with plenty of time to spare before we had to be at the airport, but as we waited in the stalled traffic, it quickly became clear that we would end up getting there late.

We did eventually make it to the I-25 interchange, only to realize that we were in the wrong lane for a left exit. Margaret bravely darted across several lanes of traffic, and we managed to turn southward toward the airport. Traffic on I-25 was still heavy, but it seemed like nothing compared to the pile-up on I-40. We drove southward a few miles and somehow managed to survive a 20mph hairpin curve with no warning at the airport exit. More or less by accident we found a parking space in the airport ramp, and we locked the car and headed for the terminal.

We had agreed to meet at the Northwest Airlines ticket counter. When we got there no one we knew was anywhere around. So we checked the flight schedule, found that Chris' flight was on time, and headed to the appropriate gate. Steve and his family were at the gate **[this, of course, was in the era when visitors could still go to airport gates]**, but we found out in the five minutes or so it took us to walk there, the status of the flight had change. Now it was delayed until mid-afternoon.

Steve and Terry greeted us, and we said hello to their children Hannah, Michelle, and Josh. Then they introduced us to their exchange students—Andrei (from Russia) and Richard (from China). They were decked out like true American teenagers in pro sports apparel. Richard lives near Lake Baikal in Siberia, but his red hair betrays his family roots in the Ukraine. Richard has to be the tallest Chinese person I have ever seen; he should be on the national basketball team. **[... And soon after this Yao Ming's entry to the NBA would show Americans that being tall and being Chinese are definitely not mutually exclusive.]** He doesn't look especially Chinese, either. I found out later that he is not ethnically Chinese. He lives in an area of central China near Tibet, and Mandarin Chinese is a second language for him. To look at him, you'd guess he could easily be an older brother of Hannah, Michelle, and Josh—

who are of Navajo Indian ancestry. That makes some sense, since the Navajo do trace their ancestry directly back to Asia (long ago, though it may be).

Since we had time to kill, we left the airport and went out for lunch. To simplify things, all nine of us crowded into Steve's vehicle (sort of a cross between a station wagon and a minivan), and it was quite a tight fit. I couldn't tell you where we went if you paid me. We seemed to drive forever, from one tacky strip to another. I remember that from when I was in Albuquerque before, too. The whole place seems to be one endless suburb; there's not much of a real "city" anywhere. It reminds me of Florida that way. **[I'd see the same thing later in California, and it's creeping into northern cities, too. I have a rather passionate dislike of suburbia, and Albuquerque is the personification of why I hate it. It's just strip after strip and housing development after housing development. Why they bother calling it a "city", I have no clue.]**

One thing I do remember on this drive was passing an apartment building somewhere near the University of New Mexico. I remember it because I had seen that building on the TV show "Cops" when they had visited Albuquerque. I'm not sure that's a good thing, but at least we were going by it in daylight. **[Cops has been to Albuquerque numerous times, and they continue to produce frequent episodes there today. Like all "new" cities, it has a highly transient population and all the many problems associated with that.]**

Eventually we made it to a somewhat nicer strip. We stopped at, of all places, the Golden Corral. This one was much nicer than the one in Maryville, though. It was a huge new building with plenty of seating and an organized system of serving and paying for the food. We had their all-you-can-eat buffet, which featured a variety of main courses (from meat loaf to chicken to pizza to fajitas), as well as potatoes, green vegetables, a variety of soups, lettuce and specialty salads, and desserts. All this cost about six dollars. **[That lets me know just how much prices have skyrocketed in recent years. I was at Bonanza not long ago, and their food bar (not nearly so nice as this one) was \$8.95.]** Steve was upset because apparently they often have employees carving roast beef to order, but today they didn't. Oh well, I think we had enough to eat anyhow.

We crowded back into Steve's car and returned to the airport. We found out that there had been bad weather in Minneapolis, and we were told by a Northwest employee that Chris had been re-scheduled on a United flight through Denver. We found the United gate and watched the plane land. People gradually made their way through the tunnel, but Chris was nowhere to be found. A couple of other families were obviously also waiting for people who had not shown. We asked the United employee at the gate, and he was downright rude to us. He told us Chris did have a confirmed reservation on the flight, but he was not legally permitted to say whether or not Chris had boarded the plane. He was also not able to tell us (even though his computer screen clearly has the information on it) whether Chris had boarded the plane in Minneapolis to get to Denver or whether he had even left Mason City in the morning.

[It probably would violate Chris' confidentiality to release such information, particularly since his ticket wasn't actually issued by United. It's bizarre, though, that they confirmed that he should have been on the flight to begin with. This is one of those problems that would have been much lessened in the cell phone era, when a quick call directly to him could have confirmed his status.]

After arguing with two different United officials, we eventually went back to the Northwest desk. Terry explained the situation, and the Northwest employees were much more pleasant and helpful. They pointed out that there was a horrible snowstorm in the Midwest. "Minnie's a real mess," said the clerk, referring to the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport. Apparently Chris had been automatically re-booked on the United flight because his flight from Mason City was more than two hours late. However records showed he had not boarded the flight from Minneapolis to Denver. There was also no seat assignment for him coming from Mason City to Minneapolis.

The Northwest staff tried to page Chris at the Minneapolis airport, but they couldn't get through to the paging staff there. They also tried to no avail to contact the Mason City airport. Then they tried Chris' apartment in Decorah, but they got his answering machine. Terry left a message for Chris, and then we went on our way.

We still don't know exactly what was up. Confusing things further is that there was a problem with Chris picking up the tickets for his flight which had been express mailed to him. There was apparently very bad weather, which could mean he was unable to leave Decorah or that he got to Mason City too late for his flight. Whether it was the weather or the ticket problem or what, no one knows even today, but we do know (mostly because after getting his answering machine, Terry later got a busy signal) that Chris ended up spending Christmas in Iowa. Hannah, Michelle, and Josh were obviously disappointed that their big brother didn't make it out to see them for the holidays, but that seemed to make them even happier that Margaret and I were there.

From the airport we went to Jin and Arnold's place. My aunt and uncle have retired to a very nice mobile home park **[that phrase sounds like a contradiction, but it was basically true]** in the southeast corner of Albuquerque. Even though it seemed as if we had just finished eating, Aunt Jin insisted on feeding us supper. **[She was of that era when feeding guests was an essential part of entertaining.]** I had to practically force myself to stuff the food down, even though it was truly delicious. We had a nice visit with Jin and Arnold, and also with my cousins Betty and Lee. There was still a fair distance to travel, though, so we had to cut things short and get on our way before it got too late.

We left the trailer park and drove north on Juan Tabo Road, down yet another suburban strip. One of the stranger places we drove past was a fast food place that featured weinerschnitzel. **[Actually, I'd find out later in California that the restaurant chain called Weinerschnitzel in fact serves hot dogs.]** We passed that up and instead stopped at Burger King for coffee. Then we headed westward again down I-40.

New Mexico is dark at night—dark in a way that we don't really know in Iowa. Once we were out of Albuquerque there was suddenly nothing but night. In Iowa you see farm lights peering into the night sky and headlights reflect the billboards beside the road. There are plenty of billboards here, but almost none of them have reflective paint, so they get lost in the night. **[That remains one of the strangest things about New Mexico to me.]** You don't see any real farms either, and you definitely don't have the farm lights at regular intervals as beacons in the night.

Partly because the night is so dark, the towns really stand out.. I mentioned arriving in Tucumcari yesterday. Driving down I-40 every town, however small, looked like a major city as it spread out lights along the horizon. Part of the reason the towns look so big is the way they are built. Towns here are much more spread out than Midwestern towns. There's lots of space between the houses, and even more space between neighborhoods. They tend to string along the highway literally for miles. The biggest place we went through tonight was Grants (population 8,000), but it looked as if every other exit was a major city.

Eventually we made it to Exit 53, which leads to the Town of Thoreau. Pronounced nearly like "through", but with almost two syllables, the town was named after an early rail boss who just happened to have the same name as a famous author. Thoreau has just over a thousand people, but it almost certainly covers more land area than Algona. The vast majority of the residents are Navajo, who traditionally have loved their space. Much of the town consists of groupings of homes—often with a traditional octagonal hogan, a modern frame house, and a mobile home housing three generations of family. It can be a quarter mile between one family group and another, yet this is all considered the same town. The more densely packed areas consist of mobile homes and "chapter housing", the rural Indian equivalent of the "projects" found in big cities.

I recently looked at a map of Thoreau on the internet, and I was amazed by what I saw. At first the place looks like any other town; it looks like a lot of those suburbs that have a few major boulevards and numerous side streets that loop around. When you look closer, though, you realize that the scale is different than it would be on a map of a suburb. The distances are larger than they would be most places, and there are fewer streets than you would think there should be. The map helped me appreciate just how spread out the place is.

Margaret and I made a couple of wrong turns onto looping side streets, but eventually we found our way to Castle Rock Road, one of the main streets that leads out of town. We took this for quite a ways and then turned off onto Hawk Circle, the small loop that leads past the local school and its "teacherages"—housing units provided by the school for those who work there. The residents in this small neighborhood comprise almost all of the Anglo population of Thoreau. After jolting over a few speed bumps, we eventually found our way to Steve and Terry's house.

Steve and Terry live in a brick and stucco bungalow about the size of my apartment. Their home is identical to most of the other teacherages, but somewhat better kept up than most of them. The house includes a tiny kitchen, a combination entryway/dining room, a small living room, a fair-sized master bedroom (with toilet and shower), two smaller bedrooms, and a full bath. There is no basement and no garage. Steve, Terry, three elementary children, and two high school exchange students all live in what is really a very small house.

[As I write this, thousands of "McMansions" across America are going into foreclosure. The families that occupy those enormous suburban homes are in most cases smaller than Steve's, and they have so much space that each member of the family ends up with more area than the teacherages. That's certainly a change from the past. I recently came across a picture of the apartment building in Honolulu where Barack Obama grew up and where his grandparents lived until their death. The Dunham's apartment was 500 square feet, which is about the size of my living room and dining room—about half the size of my apartment. The President-elect's home in Chicago is certainly larger than that, but in no way huge or grand. It reminds me of the old brick house where my brother Steve lived in Decorah. I think we could have avoided many of the economic problems we have today if people had gone for modest homes rather than ostentatious ones.]

There are no motels in Thoreau, but fortunately Margaret and I did not have to add to the crowding. Steve and Terry's next-door neighbors were visiting family in California for the holidays, and they graciously offered to let Margaret and I sleep in their home. The O'Keefe's home has an identical floor plan to Steve and Terry's, but it doesn't seem to have held up as well as the Burrow's house. It's strange how out of two identical houses, one can be in much nicer shape than another. It helps that Steve and Terry have somewhat nicer furniture, but the O'Keefe's home also has a lot of physical deterioration that needs to be fixed.

There was certainly nothing seriously wrong with the O'Keefe's place, though, and it was most gracious of them to let us stay there. We shared the place with a very lonely cat, a couple of birds, and a pet tarantula. There was also a table full of plants that Mr. O'Keefe, a science teacher, had brought home from school over the holidays. Margaret slept in the master bedroom, while I had the room of their two boys, Matty and Marty. Matthew is apparently the couple's natural child, while Martin is an adopted Hispanic child. They also adopted his little sister who has an off name I can't remember (Clarissa, maybe, or perhaps it's Charisse). The girl apparently sleeps in the room with the birds. Everywhere we looked in the house there were family pictures. I think the last time I saw so many photos on the walls was at my grandparents' home years ago.

We unpacked and got settled into the O'Keefe's home, and then we sat around and talked with Steve and Terry for a while. We were all pretty tired, and before long we settled in for the night.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24

McKINLEY COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

(approximately 200 miles)

Two hundred miles sounds like a lot, but actually it's the same 35 miles six different times. Today we went back and forth between Thoreau and the nearby "big city", Gallup.

My bed at the O'Keefe's definitely wasn't up to motel standards. I had the bottom bunk of the boys' bunk beds. Nevertheless, I slept quite a bit better than I had in either Maryville or Tukumcari. After I showered, there was still a bit of time left before we had arranged to meet at Steve's. I filled it by watching a bit of TV. The O'Keefe's don't have cable, but they get something like seven channels. That's not quite so impressive when you realize that several of those are duplicate repeaters of the same station. I think they actually get three different choices. I chose an ABC station (which appeared on three different channels) and watched "Good Morning, New Mexico", a tie-in to "Good Morning, America".

Soon Margaret was also up. She browsed through the O'Keefe's bookshelf and was fascinated by one particular book. Mr. O'Keefe had at one point worked in South America, and this book was on a specific group of cannibalistic natives down there. Margaret filled her spare time for the remainder of our stay here by reading that book.

Steve cooked bacon and eggs for us; I can't remember when I last had the traditional farmer's breakfast **[other than in a restaurant]**. Then we sat around and visited for a while. We also watched a bit more TV. Steve happens to have one of those miniature satellite dishes, and they have channels numbered in the hundreds. Many of those are blank, but they still get more stations than I'd ever imagine you could want. So, out of all those choices, what did Andrei choose to tune into: that hallmark of American culture, "The Price is Right".

Later in the morning Steve gave us the grand tour of Thoreau. Mostly he needed to go to the post office (which happens to be one of the nicest buildings in town), but on the way to and from there we saw pretty much everything there was to see. Thoreau is frankly quite dumpy, but it's not really unpleasant. Except for being so ridiculously spread out, it reminds me a lot of the small towns in Mississippi. You definitely don't have that Midwestern feeling of tidiness, but there is a sort of friendly feeling you'd expect to find in a small town.

One thing Thoreau is very short on is businesses, although there is actually more than when I was here before. They have two convenience stores (with different names, but owned by the same company), a small grocery, a video place, an auto parts store, and a bank. There's also an outlet for Navajo arts and crafts. That's pretty much it for business.

Churches, on the other hand, there are quite a few of. The largest appears to be the St. Bonaventure Mission, which is associated with a school and (of all things) a campground. New Mexico seems to be even shorter on priests than Iowa. "St. Bonnie's" has no resident pastor, and according to their sign there is one mass said there weekly—on Saturdays. Thoreau also has a collection of conservative Protestant churches (the "gospel tabernacle" sort of thing), and the Mormons.

We also saw the elementary school that the kids go to and several other locally important landmarks. One of the things I found most interesting is the distribution of land in this area. Steve calls it the "checkerboard". Some of it is Indian land, part of the Navajo reservation. All the chapter housing, for instance, is Navajo land. A sign there says "Welcome to the Navajo Nation". Apparently Steve and Terry's home is also on Navajo land. The school district leased the land for the teacherages from the tribe. Mixed in with the Indian land are privately-owned lots and federal land (mostly national forest). Without a map to show you, you can't really tell what belongs to whom.

We stopped at one other place on our tour of Thoreau, at the Thriftway convenience store. This particular store was made nationally famous a few years back as the place where the first case of the Muerto Canyon hantavirus was discovered. You may have heard the hantavirus written up with such names as the "Navajo plague" or the "Four Corners mystery disease". It is spread by mouse droppings and causes flu-like symptoms that quickly escalate into serious lung problems. There was an epidemic in the early '90s after a particularly wet period caused an enormous increase in the mouse population. Over a hundred people, most of them healthy young Navajos, died. The disease is still around, but in years of normal weather it is much less common. They found that ordinary household disinfectants (e.g.: Lysol) will kill the virus, so it doesn't cause nearly the scare it did in the past.

I bought some Chapstick at Thriftway. While I think of winter as dry, I definitely wasn't prepared for the extent of dryness that the desert winter offers. My lips were raw, and some relief was definitely in order. I also picked up a few munchies and a copy of the *Navajo Times*.

Published in Window Rock, Arizona, the *Navajo Times* is the "official newspaper of the Navajo people". It tells the tale of all things Navajo. Among the more interesting stories in this issue was the announcement that the tribal police force was looking to hire 49 new officers. To qualify to join the Navajo Nation Police Force, you must be "a young Navajo with no citations in the past three years". The newspaper itself admitted that the last requirement made it difficult to find the required number of candidates.

Another big story on "the Rez" (reservation) was the tribe's proposal to build a prison. Part of the facility would house people who got in trouble with the Navajo Nation Police, but most of it would be contracted out to house inmates from states with overcrowded

prisons. Proponents thought this would be a big money-maker for the tribe. **[I don't know whether the prison went through or not. I do know that a lot of prisoners get exported to the Southwest. More than half of inmates sentenced in Alaska state courts, for instance, actually spend their terms in Arizona.]**

The biggest feature article told about Ranalda L. Tsosie, who recently won the title of Miss Northern Navajo. Miss Tsosie spent most of her life away from Navajoland. She studied in California and North Carolina, and then was an exchange student in Germany. Now she was back living with her family in northern Arizona. The pageant she won is fascinating. She had to demonstrate "traditional Navajo skills", for which she ground corn and sang a song in the traditional Navajo language. There was also a "contemporary skills" category, where she sang the song "Colors of the Wind" from the movie *Pocahontas* (interesting concept for an Indian woman) and baked a strawberry cake. There were some personality components, of course, but there was also a sheep butchering category (which is apparently somehow different from a traditional Navajo skill).

The sports section also provided some interesting reading. It is apparently traditional during the holiday break for schools to travel to distant basketball tournaments. This paper gave the results of tournaments in Page and Winslow, Arizona. What was most interesting was the distance teams traveled to get to those tournaments. Schools from New Mexico and Colorado were playing teams from Nevada and California. I thought it was a big deal when I was growing up and the Mt. Pleasant Panthers played Notre Dame from Quincy, Illinois. Here we're talking teams from hundreds of miles away. Margaret and I discussed this while we were driving one day, and we figured going to these tournaments is probably similar to a senior trip. To my mind Winslow and Page don't exactly compare with Chicago and Washington, but I suppose it's the idea of going somewhere different that leads to the appeal.

One thing I'd forgotten since I was here last were the traditional Navajo names. Two of the most common Navajo surnames are Yazzie and Begay, which Steve likens to Smith and Jones. There are three different Yazzies listed on the editorial staff of the *Navajo Times*, for instance. Other names are full of T's and S's, the worst of which also have apostrophes that are pronounced as glottal stops. A number of Navajo have Hispanic surnames, and then there's the occasional name like MacDonald that doesn't quite seem to belong out here.

After our tour of Thoreau, Steve made a chicken and pasta dish for lunch. Then Terry and the kids started making Christmas cookies. The exchange students especially seemed to enjoy this, and they were proud to tell us exactly which shapes were their creations.



Terry Burrow, by her computer

Terry also turned on their computer and had the kids send e-mail messages to Santa Claus. How's that for modern times? In my day we had to wait for the post office to deliver our lists all the way to the North Pole; today kids can use the internet to e-mail their lists at the last minute. All three of the kids sent their messages to Santa, as did the two exchange students.

The exchange students' letters were interesting because of a warning Steve and Terry had repeatedly given their kids. They said the kids had better be good, or they would end up with rocks instead of Christmas gifts. (In my day it was a lump of coal, but who's counting?) In Andrei's letter he asked Santa to bring something nice for "poor Russian exchange student", and he noted that if he had to get rocks, gold ones would do nicely. Richard told Santa that he wanted rocks for Christmas, so he would have a present to give "poor Russian exchange student".

In the middle of the afternoon we went into Gallup to go shopping. To get there we went back to I-40 and followed it westward. Thoreau is situated around 7,000 feet above sea level, just six miles east of the Continental Divide. There's actually a town called "Continental Divide" at the top of one of the lowest passes in the Rockies. Beyond there is an enormous truckstop (more on that later), then a military reservation (Fort Wingate), and then from Exit 26 almost all the way to the Arizona border the city of Gallup sprawls on forever.

Gallup (again named after a rail boss; the place has nothing to do with the poll or with horses) is the self-proclaimed capital of Indian country. While the title may be self-bestowed, it is a reasonable one. Over a third of the town's population is Indian, making

them the single largest group. In addition to the Navajo, there are also Apache and Zuni reservations in the area, and just a little ways east is the start of Pueblo country. Gallup is one of the most important trade centers for all the Indians in the Four Corners area.

When I was here before Steve warned me that he would always avoid going to Gallup on the 1st of the month. That's the day public assistance checks are issued, and it's also the day some people go on a shopping spree while others try to drink themselves into a stupor. I didn't quite understand what he meant then, but now I do. We went shopping at Gallup's Rio West Mall, and Steve told us the frantic crowd on Christmas Eve was reasonably similar to what we would see on the 1st of the month.

I was really surprised at just how crowded the mall was on Christmas Eve. I've been shopping elsewhere on December 24th, and it's usually a pretty light day. In fact, it's the one day of the year I actually enjoyed shopping at Mall of America. In Gallup, though, they should have had reporters doing one of those "crush at the mall" stories. Everyone here seemed to have waited until the last possible second to do their Christmas shopping, and they were all jamming into the mall at once to get it finished.

We first stood in line at the Sunwest automatic teller, where first Steve and then I got some cash. Margaret also tried, but the machine told her that her balance was \$0. She knew that unless there was some drastic mistake that was wrong, but there was no way she could get the machine to give her any money.

We then walked around the mall, and Margaret and I ended up at K-Mart. We still wanted to get gifts for the exchange students, and we figured this was the place to do so. We had also joked with Steve and Terry about finding a creative way of giving the kids rocks. We wanted to pick up some metallic spray paint and paint some gravel to look like gold.

We walked into K-Mart and could barely catch our breath; the place was an utter madhouse. There were people everywhere, and none of the merchandise seemed to be where it was supposed to be. There were whole aisles with empty shelves, while in other places goods were strewn on the floor. I'm not going to say the Algona K-Mart is always the most pleasant place to shop, but I'm confident I've never seen it in this bad of shape.

We did manage to find some gifts. Andrei had remarked that one of the things he missed most from Russia was coffee. Steve and Terry don't drink coffee; they don't even have a coffee pot in the house. Margaret and I picked up one of those tiny plastic percolators (the kind they used to call "poly-perk") and a can of coffee for Andrei. We weren't as excited about our gift for Richard (a scenic America calendar and a desk calendar), but at least we had something. We tried to find spray paint for the rocks, but there was no metallic spray paint to be found. Eventually we settled for some "glitter glue" paints they sell with school supplies.

It took us nearly an hour to negotiate the crowd at K-Mart, and we only had a tiny bit of time to make a quick look around the rest of the mall. Soon we met the rest of the group and fought the traffic out of town.

When we got back to Thoreau, each of the kids had an e-mail message on the computer. Santa (or his computer nerd helpers) had responded to each of their letters. The messages were virtually identical, with a P.S. specific to each child. The P.S. said something like "the elves were looking into the _____", with the blank being whatever gift the child had asked for. Most amusing was Richard's e-mail message, which told him the elves were working on getting him some rocks.

We didn't have a formal supper tonight. Instead we just munched on cookies, cheese balls, and the enormous pile of other junk food that accumulated for the holidays. Before long we got dressed and headed back to Gallup for church.

Steve and Terry usually attend the Methodist Church in Grants. Terry said the Gallup church was larger, though, and she expected it would have a better service on Christmas Eve. Steve took a long route into the city, driving us past a number of homes with beautiful Christmas decorations. We made it to the corner of Nizhoni and Red Rock, site of the church, just in time for the service.

Architecturally, this church was unlike anything I had seen before. It is quite modern, but I think it was built to incorporate several traditional Southwestern architectural characteristics. Among the strangest features were the walls of the sanctuary. Instead of stained glass windows, there were bare plaster walls, with only tiny windows at the top. I was also intrigued by the orange carpet they had down the main aisle. Those things aside, it was a nice church—both as a building and a congregation.



Christmas Eve at 15 Hawk Circle, Thoreau, NM

The service was also nice. Reverend Jeff Symonds (their English pastor; they also have a Spanish pastor) urged us to remember the homeless at Christmas and noted that a large number of homeless people lived in Gallup. I hadn't really thought of that, but it's probably true. While it was chilly while we were there, overall Gallup has a mild enough climate that the homeless could survive. Moreover, there are certainly a lot of poor people who are one step away from homelessness. I'm not sure how the message went over with this mostly Anglo, mostly middle-class congregation.

Probably the most annoying part of the service was the hymns. This church, like most Methodist churches today, uses the new *United Methodist Hymnal*. While far worse hymnals have been published (the new abomination by my own United Church of Christ comes to mind), the Methodists made a point of using "inclusive" language in their hymnal. Most of the time I'm fairly neutral on that issue, but in such traditional hymns as Christmas carols it really bothers me. I'll sound like an old fogie for complaining, but I really do think they should leave well enough alone in the long-standing, traditional hymns. I usually sing Christmas carols from memory, and it bothers me when we come to a phrase like "born to raise the sons of earth" and everyone else is singing totally different words. **[The *United Methodist Hymnal* is now one of the most established and "conservative" of modern hymnals. I still can't say I really care for it, though. I've gone to just singing from memory, regardless of what the printed words are—and mostly that doesn't seem to be a real problem.]**

The communion was interesting in this church, too. The ushers directed people to the front by rows. The minister gave chunks of bread from a large loaf, and then people knelt at the rail to take the "wine (quotation marks intentional; this is a Methodist church after-all). People could kneel at the altar for as short or long a time as they desired. Most kept it short, but a few stayed there a while and said extended prayers. I found it a pleasant and efficient way to do communion. It sort of combines the best of various methods of distributing the elements.

On the way back to Thoreau we stopped at the Giant Truck Center, just west of Continental Divide. Margaret needed to buy gas, and it made for an interesting stop. I also stopped here when I visited Steve before, and it was at least as fascinating today. The truck stop is more than just a gas station and restaurant. It's basically a mini-mall located out in the middle of nowhere. They sell clothing, drugstore goods, and souvenirs in various shops and in a bazaar that covers the main hallway. There's a full-service restaurant as well as the equivalent of a small food court, a one-hour photo place, and a motel. Of course there's also a convenience store, and they do sell gas. The place was booming tonight. It amazed me just how much business they were doing on a night when many businesses are closed up tight.

Margaret also tried to use the automatic teller at Giant. Once again it told her she had no money. The good news was that once again it was a Sunwest machine. We all hoped that if we could only find a different bank's ATM, it might function properly with her card.

We went back to Thoreau and just relaxed for a while. Steve had set up luminarias in his driveway, and the kids were excited to light them and watch the candles burn. Margaret and I wrapped gifts for the exchange students, and then we just sat around and talked. Before long it was time to go back into Gallup yet again.



**Sacred Heart Cathedral – Gallup, New Mexico
(from the diocesan website)**

Before long we came to 415 E. Green Street, site of Sacred Heart Cathedral.

The cathedral was also decked out for the holidays. On all the sidewalks leading up to the church we saw the glow of candles in brown paper bags. Inside the place was truly gorgeous. It's really a very simple church, particularly for a "cathedral". It lacks the elegant statues and altarpiece I often associate with Catholic churches. This very simplicity adds to the beauty, though. The wall behind the altar features a pattern of light and dark bricks forming the design of a Navajo rug. Centered in front is an enormous wooden crucifix. There was one small statue of St. Joseph in the front. We assumed there was also a Mary, but she appeared to have been temporarily moved to make room for a display of Christmas trees. The whole building is brick, inside and out. There are several striking windows along the walls, some of which were backlit tonight, so we could see their beauty even at night. There was greenery hung along the walls, looping up above each of the stations of the cross. The lights were dim, but bright enough to see, and the whole effect was truly beautiful.

The church was packed for midnight mass. We got there around 11:15, and already almost every pew in the main sanctuary was full. We managed to squeeze in near the aisle about a third of the way from the back. Before long they opened up the side chapels, and they, too, were filled to overflowing. There were scads of people standing in back all through mass.

Margaret and I decided it would be interesting to go to midnight mass. Since St. Bonnie's in Thoreau didn't offer anything, Steve suggested we go to the cathedral in Gallup. While we knew it would be a very late night, I think both of us are glad to have gone.

As we were leaving we saw a gorgeous sight in the sky. It was crisp and cold, and there was a full moon for Christmas Eve (according to the papers, the first time this century that has happened). There was a ring around the moon in the clear, dark sky, which really was both pretty and unique. It really made it seem like a special occasion.

We drove back into Gallup and this time exited at Montoya Boulevard. Almost everything here seems to have a Spanish or Indian name; it's enough to make you think you're in Old Mexico. We drove past the historic El Rancho Hotel and then through a ritzy residential area with some of the most gorgeous Christmas decorations we saw anywhere. Most striking were the luminarias that had been set in indentations in a stone

The ethnic mix of the congregation was interesting; it was roughly the same as the whole of Gallup. Gallup itself is about one-third Anglo, one-third Hispanic, and one-third Indian. (There are smaller numbers of Blacks and Asians, for good measure.) The church also had representatives of all three big ethnic groups. It was probably a bit heavier on Hispanics and a bit lighter on Indians than the town as a whole, although that's really hard to tell—Hispanics and Indians look an awful lot alike. The point is, though, it was very clear that everyone was welcome here.

The hour before mass was filled with hymns, sung only slightly less half-heartedly than the Catholics around here do. Then there was a grand parade as the bishop, his concelebrating priests ("Msgr. Gomez" and "Father Joe"), and all the readers and servers made their way down the aisle to the front. It definitely put the processionalists at our school masses to shame. The service music was lovely. Several of the responses were from "Misa de las Americas", but sung in English. The "Holy" was to the tune of Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!, and the "Great Amen" was to the tune of the "Gloria" from "Angels We Have Heard on High".

The bishop's homily was quite uninspiring. The Methodist minister was no great orator, but he might have been Martin Luther King compared to this guy. Margaret described him as a baby bishop, and he did seem impossibly young to hold that office. He was easily half the age of Lawrence Soens here in the Sioux City Diocese. Whatever his age, though, Donald Pelotte is Bishop of the Diocese of Gallup, which apparently covers parts of three states but consists mostly of the Navajo reservation. I can't really tell you what the bishop had to say. I remember him droning on forever in his thanks to some radio station for broadcasting the mass "for hundreds of miles across New Mexico and Arizona", and I remember him repeating over and over again the lines "look at that cradle; look at that cross" while gesturing to the crèche and crucifix respectively. The cradle and cross became a running joke; he had to have said it at least ten times.

The bishop's homily was at least as long as the Methodist pastor's sermon—no brief holiday message for this guy. Then came the most fascinating part of the service. Margaret and I had prepared ourselves to feel awkward at communion time, but we needn't have worried. Of the huge crowd in the cathedral, less than half actually went up to take communion. There are probably two reasons. Some of the people are the sort of Christmas/Easter churchgoers that don't really feel qualified to take communion. Others, though, may be old-time Hispanics who celebrate Christmas by keeping an all-night vigil at church, with communion only once during the parade of masses. The church bulletin did mention that they were open all night long Christmas Eve, and they had five masses scattered throughout the time. I must say, though, this was the first time in my life that I've ever been part of the majority when it came time for communion at mass.

We got another clue as to the ethnic make-up of the area when we sang "Silent Night". We sang three verses in English, and then we sang a verse in Spanish:

Noche de paz,
Noche de amor.
Todo duerme en derredor.
Entre los astros
que esparcen su luz,
Bella anunciando al niño Jesús.
Brilla la estrella de paz,
Brilla la estrella de paz!

The way the church reacted to that reminded me of a church near Decorah where Margaret and I went a few years back. There they sang "Silent Night" in Czech. Both places all the adults knew the words, but it wasn't like they sang it every day. Rather, it was a way of remembering their heritage at the holidays. We often think of Hispanics as recent immigrants, but many of the Mexican-Americans here have been here longer than the Anglos.

We took the journal and newsletter as we left church. It was fascinating to read those and find out about the Diocese of Gallup. Not only do they have a priest shortage, but they also have some serious financial problems. For the past five straight weeks Cathedral Parish was behind on their budget by more than \$1,000 a week—and that in December, which is usually one of the bigger months for offering. **[That is, one of the bigger months in places where middle class and wealthy people are looking for tax deductions; it's probably less so in a place where poor people's main concern is buying gifts for their kids.]** The highlights of the past year in the newsletter mentioned that they closed the local convent and stopped hearing daily confessions. At one point in summer there was only one priest serving the cathedral, the first time in history that had happened. St. Jerome's, another Gallup-area church, was closed this past year, and the cathedral now served some of its former members. The coming events held some interesting items, though; strangest on the list was probably the annual Ash Wednesday Enchilada Sale. I wonder if those are meatless enchiladas.

Mass took a full hour and a half; it was 1:45 by the time we finally got out of Gallup. We stopped at Giant to get a cup of coffee and wake up a bit. I was amazed that the place was still buzzing at two in the morning on Christmas Day. The actual stores were closed (except for the convenience store), but the bazaar in the hallway was going strong. The place was filled with Navajo males between 16 and 20, most of whom were sitting around playing video games—at 2:00 Christmas morning. The only woman in the place appeared to be the convenience store clerk, but everyone seemed pretty laid back about things.

It was pushing 2:30 by the time we got back to Thoreau. Again we admired the ring around that gorgeous full moon. Then we went back to the O'Keefe's house and got a bit of sleep.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25

CHRISTMAS DAY

AROUND THOREAU, NEW MEXICO
(approximately 50 miles--???)

Steve had arranged to start opening presents relatively late this morning. After our late night at mass, I was certainly grateful. It does amaze me how well behaved his kids are. I can't imagine how I'd have acted as a child if someone told me I had to wait to open my Christmas presents.



Michelle, Hanna, and Josh Burrow – Christmas morning, 1996

It was mid-morning when we went over to Steve's and gathered around the tree. Steve told us that the exchange students had a delightful time playing Santa Claus and filling the stockings while we were at mass. After Andrei and Richard had gone to sleep, Steve and Terry painted some gravel, and they carefully saw to it that everyone got some rocks for Christmas—it must be that none of us were as good as we should have been during the past year.

We had a fun time opening presents. The kids seemed to enjoy everything they got, and we adults didn't do too bad for ourselves either. Andrei seemed to appreciate his percolator and coffee, and Richard was at least polite about the calendars. (He may have even liked them, but I can't say either Margaret or I was terribly thrilled with that gift.) After opening gifts we all just relaxed and visited with one another.

In the afternoon most of us went out for a drive in Steve's car. Michelle hadn't been feeling well, so she and Terry stayed behind. The rest of us went out, supposedly in search of a hiking trail to Castle Rock, a little mountain that hovers over Thoreau. We drove and drove, first on pavement, then on gravel, and then on dirt roads. Eventually the "roads" we were driving on turned to rough tracks through the middle of nowhere. I told Steve I felt as if I were on safari. I almost expected an elephant or a giraffe to jump out as we drove along. Steve appears to know these roads—either that or he's got a lot more guts than I do. I'll stick with the interstate and Historic 66, thank you very much.



Steve driving in the middle of nowhere

We saw all sides of Castle Rock, and several other mountains for that matter. It fascinated me how much the weather changed with elevation out here. There was no snow at all in Thoreau. Just a little higher up we saw snow patches, and higher still there were whole fields of snow. That's not exactly a white Christmas, but it was enough to give at least a taste of the holiday spirit.

We had driven north and west of Thoreau to find Castle Rock. Once we had finished exploring that area, we crossed under the interstate and set off southward (on a state highway with actual pavement) toward Bluewater Lake. Bluewater Lake is exactly what its name implies. It's also quite a rarity around here. There's a state park around the lake and a pleasant little village nearby. At one point Steve and Terry considered buying a home in the village, and I can see why they liked it. It's a lovely home in a nice-looking little town. The main problem is that the place is even more isolated than Thoreau.



Castle Rock – near Thoreau, New Mexico

We returned to Steve and Terry's house. Terry and Michelle were watching the video *Little Shop of Horrors*. Later Andrei decided to put on a video of Roadrunner cartoons that he had gotten for Christmas (there's the sort of American culture we really want the whole world to know about). Later on we had dinner, with the traditional Christmas ham.

The kids went to bed, but Margaret and I stayed up talking with Steve and Terry well into the night. One of the things we talked about was the details of their adopting Hannah, Michelle, and Josh. The kids went through a lot of unpleasant times—both with their natural mother and with foster families—before they were finally settled. While they seem remarkably well adjusted and well-behaved to outside observers like Margaret and me, their parents still occasionally notice the effects of the past coming through.

The lazy Christmas evening blended into a lazy Boxing Day, and before long we were all getting pretty tired. We went to bed after a most enjoyable holiday.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 26

THOREAU CROWNPOINT GRANTS RAMAH AND GALLUP NEW MEXICO
(approximately 240 miles)

This day started off with a long, lazy morning. We got up late and then just sat around and visited. **[This was partially because one of the children was being punished with a "time out".]** I spent much of the morning thumbing through a book of the O'Keefe's with a title something like "Dr. Tightwad's Guide to Child Care". Reading through the book, I think I must have been brought up by Dr. Tightwad. More to the point, almost everything I read seemed pretty much like common sense to me. I really do wonder about some parents these days who let their kids have anything and everything they want. **[It really is amazing just how spoiled many kids are these days—and then their parents wonder why they can't do any thing independently when they finally do "grow up".]**

Eventually the morning drew to a close and we finally got going for the day. Early in the afternoon we set out for the day. Steve and his family packed into the van, while Margaret and I followed in her car. Our plan for the day was to make a "circle tour" of points of interest near Thoreau. The circle we made is of a size only a Westerner would consider "near" Thoreau. It would be almost like starting in Algona and going to Mason City, Fort Dodge, and Spencer, all in the same trip. They're all "near" Algona, but they're not really near each other.

We began by driving northward on state highway 371. I chuckled a bit at the first place we went beyond Thoreau. It was called Smith Lake, the same name as a little development near Algona. This Indian settlement was a far cry from anything you'd see in Iowa, though.

Highway 371 really makes a pleasant drive. I wish we had gone this way when I was out here before; I think I would have left with a better impression of New Mexico. The land is just a little bit higher up, which makes it wetter. That allows trees to grow, which to my mind really improves the scenery. Just beyond Smith Lake we crossed the Continental Divide. The landscape was still not rugged, but much more mountainous than along the interstate.

Before long we came to the town of Crownpoint, the eastern administrative center for the Navajo Nation. That makes Crownpoint roughly equivalent to a county seat. If you look at a map, you will see that Crownpoint appears to be quite a ways east of the Navajo reservation. Like Thoreau, though, most of the land around here is Indian land. Crownpoint (population of 2,100) houses a variety of tribal government services, the local offices for the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, and lovely new residential developments that are the nicest "chapter housing" we saw anywhere.

The town also has a fascinating little shopping center with some endless and unpronounceable Navajo name (with those glottal stop apostrophes that make me want to say "Bless you"). Its anchor store was a lovely supermarket far nicer than I would have expected to find in this little backwater in the middle of nowhere. Basha's is a Phoenix-based chain which apparently has several locations in the Navajo Nation. Steve tells me that Crownpoint is their only New Mexico location. Basha's is like one of the nicer Hy-Vee stores in Iowa. It offers virtually every product and service you could possibly imagine in a supermarket, with the emphasis definitely on the upscale. It reminded me of the elegant little market on the Chicago lakefront where Margaret and I shopped last summer more than the only grocery store in a small, isolated town.

Among other things, Basha's had a full-service deli. Since we hadn't eaten either breakfast or lunch yet, we decided to have a late lunch here. Margaret and I spotted what we thought were bargains—day-old dinner salads (the chef salad sort of thing) for a dollar each. I bought a salad and some chocolate milk (from Shamrock Dairies, although Irish is one ethnicity I don't think they have much of around here). Margaret had a similar lunch. Unfortunately we soon found out that the "cooler" the salads were sitting in was actually a freezer. The salads looked beautiful, but they were in fact frozen throughout. Salad vegetables are mostly water, and they had all turned to ice—crunchy, perhaps, but not terribly appetizing. We could each down only a few bites.

We did a bit of shopping in the supermarket as well. Margaret and I, having the tastes we do, visited their coffee department. They had half an aisle of specialty coffees, a greater variety than I'd expect to find in Des Moines, let alone Crownpoint. We settled on "Qué bien café", a finely ground dark roast coffee. The stuff is sold by a New Jersey company (Compass Foods), but labeled mostly in Spanish.

After going through the grocery store, we walked to the other end of the shopping center, where we found a place called simply "General Store". Imagine a big, lighted sign with that name on it. It, too, was a fascinating place, although it was the antithesis of Basha's. "General Store" looked like a Dollar General Store or a really bad, old Pamida, but it had a lot wider variety of merchandise than I'd expect to find either place. You could buy almost anything here, as long as you were happy to put up with a single brand or style. The place **WAS** what I'd expect in a nothing little backwater like Crownpoint, although being part of a mall was a bit strange.

Almost everything seemed like a bargain, too. I bought a shirt for \$5, which was the regular price. I also picked up a belt, some kitchen utensils, and a number of cheap toys to add to my collection of Pepsi memorabilia. Finally at the check-out I made an impulse buy and picked up *Wrangler's Cowboy Christmas*, a tape of country singers singing holiday songs sponsored by a blue jeans company. I was particularly amused by the concept of celebrating a "cowboy Christmas" on an Indian reservation, but I seriously doubt the clerk or any of the local customers saw anything unusual in it. **[Wrangler's Cowboy Christmas remains one of the best Christmas albums I've ever bought. It's a pleasant collection of light country songs that mostly don't seem to be available anywhere else.]**

I also picked up a newspaper; this time it was the *Four Corners Times* from Farmington, New Mexico. This is a good paper in that it has a wide variety of news, but they do a horrible job of editing it. I read to Margaret as we drove along, and we caught mistake after mistake in grammar and usage.

One minor story that caught our eye has turned out to be one of the biggest news stories of the new year: the murder of Jon-Benet Ramsey. I'm not sure I would have even noticed this story, except for the fact that just a few days ago we had watched that TV program on little girl beauty pageants. For those who don't know, Ramsey was six years old and had recently been named Little Miss Colorado. She had allegedly been kidnapped and was later found dead in the basement of her parents' home in Boulder. I must confess that Margaret and I were less than sensitive in our response to the story. We first wondered what sort of parents would hyphenate two boys' names and pretend that made a good name for a girl. **[Of course, we're finding that stupid names are nothing new. Case in point—out president-elect's mother's name was Stanley Ann Dunham.]** We also couldn't help but notice the newspaper photo of Jon-Benet Ramsey, with platinum curls and ruby lipstick—on a six-year-old, for God's sake. I certainly sympathize

with the family on the loss of their child (although more recent news seems to point to them as suspects), but I can't understand what sort of parents would dress up their daughter and put her on display before she is old enough to really understand what she is doing.

[Just recently—twelve years later—the parents were permanently cleared from suspicion. They still haven't actually solved the case.] By the way, the detective in me wonders if the murderer might not be the mother of another pre-pubescent "beauty" queen **[something I don't think has ever been investigated]**. As nasty as the parents in that TV show were, I could easily picture them taking things into their own hands to guarantee their child's crown.

I also sympathized with another Christmas tragedy. A teenaged girl in New York opened a package addressed to her father, only to have a bomb explode in her face. I think we all breathed a sigh of relief when they arrested the Unabomber, but sadly there are still an awful lot of disturbed, hateful people out there. **[...And it's amazing just how many people think there was no terrorism before 2001.]**

Just past Crownpoint, we turned east on Bureau of Indian Affairs road number 9, which is marked with a big arrowhead on the sign. There are three main destinations to which you can go from here. One is Cuba, more on that tomorrow. Another is Chaco Culture National Park, which preserves a major community of the Anazazi (ancient ones), the ancestors of the modern-day Southwestern Indians. I've never been there, but both Margaret and Steve describe the road there as being in the same category as those tracks we wandered around on near Thoreau. The final destination is Grants, which is where we were headed. Grants is only about 30 miles from Thoreau along I-40, but by this route it's more like 100 miles. I must say, though, it is much more interesting by the longer route.

It was well into the afternoon when we got to Grants, a dumpy little city that used to be a center of uranium mining. Today it seems to serve little purpose other than being the biggest thing between Albuquerque and Gallup. Steve appears to like Grants, but I can't say it does much for me. It strikes me as having all the "charm" of Fort Dodge (which is minimal at best), with far fewer services. We bought gas at a Diamond Shamrock station in Grants and soon set off southward again. We followed state highway 53 past El Malpais National Monument. The "bad country" to which "el malpais" refers is the black rock that remains from the lava flows of a volcano. It's actually fairly pretty country around here, quite heavily wooded with quite a lot of underbrush. This was yet another side of New Mexico that was quite scenic; it's too bad they put the interstate through the ugliest part of the state.

As we drove Margaret and I were amused by yet another newspaper, the Navajo Nation *Messenger*, a free publication produced by the same company that publishes the Gallup *Independent*. One of the most interesting sections here was the obituaries, which gave us a lesson in Navajo culture. In describing a Navajo's family, it is correct to mention two "clans" with which the person is associated. A Navajo is "born into" his mother's clan and "born for" his father's. The clans are local sub-divisions of the tribe, and they have fascinating names. Marie Spencer of Lower Greasewood, for instance, was born into the Coyote Pass People Clan, for the One Who Walks Around You People. Raymond Clark of Del Muerto was also born for the One Who Walks Around You People, but he was born into the Water Flowers Together People. Edison James of Ganado was born into the Sleeping Rock People, for the Black Streak of the Wood Clan. Kee Yazzie of Mentmore was born into the Saline Water People, for the Edge of the Water People. Johnnie Begay of Allentown was born into the Black Sheep People, for the Tangle Clan. Finally Herbert Blatchford of Gallup was born into the Mud People Clan.

The obituaries show the Navajos' link with the past, but the tribe is far from obsessed with their culture. It was also fascinating that on the same page was an ad for cellular phones. One of the big articles was about new fast food places (Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, and TCBY) that would soon be opening in the Navajo capital city of Window Rock. The students at the local high school are studying Shakespeare, and one community on the reservation (called Broadway, of all things) is concerned about having more input when Hollywood filmmakers make movies in the area. It's a fascinating study in contrasts.

Eventually we made it to what was in theory our destination for the day, El Morro National Monument. One thing I envy about Steve living in New Mexico is that he is so close to so many major national parks and monuments. It's at least three hours from Algona to any national park, and a full day's drive to anything of importance. There are at least eight national parks and monuments within a short drive of Thoreau, and scores more are within a day away.

Unfortunately we didn't see much of El Morro. The place closes at 5pm in winter, and we arrived about 4:45. We barely had time to rush through the museum and sneak a peak out of the window of the visitors' center. Because of this, most of my knowledge of El Morro comes from a booklet I picked up at the gift shop. That said, it really does sound like a fascinating place. El Morro is a bluff that stands above the surrounding countryside and apparently hides a pool of fresh water. It once housed an ancient Indian village, and the occupants of that village carved petroglyphs on the rock. The Spanish conquistadors later discovered the place, and they also carved inscriptions. Later on, American explorers and military people occupied the area, and they too left their mark through carvings on El Morro. It's fascinating to think of learning history through graffiti, but that's essentially what this place does. It's also a beautiful rock formation in a most attractive setting.

We left El Morro and drove through the Ramah and Zuni Indian Reservations. The Ramah (RAME-uh) are apparently related to the Navajo. Their reservation and the major town on it are named—or so Margaret and Steve tell me—after a Mormon prophet. The Zuni are apparently separate from the Navajo, although everyone around here comes from the same ancient ancestors. Before long we turned north on state highway 602 to go back to Gallup.

We could see why the national monument closed so early. Shortly after 5:00 the sun set, and it very quickly became very dark. It's a fairly long hike from the visitors' center to El Morro itself, and it's probably unwise to be out on the trail after dark. Even so, I'd like

to go back and see the place up close someday. **[Now that I don't have relatives in the area, it's not very likely I actually will, but it would be interesting to do so.]**

Back in Gallup we again stopped at the Rio West Mall. Things were much more sedate today than they were on Christmas Eve. K-Mart still looked like a disaster area with merchandise strewn everywhere, like a tornado had gone through, but at least there weren't the huge crowds that were here the other day. I picked up a couple of things at the clearance sales at K-Mart and then checked out Waldenbooks. After that Margaret and I waited in the food court for Steve and his family to finish their shopping.

I was utterly famished at this point. Keep in mind that I hadn't eaten breakfast and all I had for lunch was a bite of frozen salad. While I was waiting I had a ham sandwich and an Orange Julius. Even that didn't fill me up much, and I was glad to know that before long we'd be having supper back in Thoreau.

We drove back down I-40 to Steve's house, and he quickly started making dinner. Tonight we had a delicious Oriental dish with peanuts in it. The name was something like "kung pow" chicken. I'm, still not sure what there was in it besides peanuts, but it really was tasty.

It was quite late by the time dinner was over. We visited a little bit longer, and then it was time for bed. Margaret and I stayed up a bit later packing things up, but before long the Sandman also said goodnight to us.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 27
THOREAU, NEW MEXICO TO AMARILLO, TEXAS
(approximately 540 miles)

If you check a map for the mileage from Thoreau to Amarillo, you'll find it's a lot less than 540 miles. That's because we did a lot more today than just drive down I-40.

We got up fairly early this morning. Steve made French toast, which fortified us for our journey. We snapped a few final photos with Steve, Terry, and the kids, and then it was time to say our good-byes. Right before we left, we visited briefly with Mr. Yazzie, a Navajo craftsman who happened to stop by. **[The concept of a craftsman "happening by" is completely alien to me, but apparently it's quite normal in Thoreau.]** Margaret has a friend who collects Nativity scenes. She asked the craftsman if he could possibly make a crèche out of the kachina dolls for which the Navajo are famous. The man seemed puzzled at first, but then you could almost see the wheels turn as he came up with ideas. He suggested a scene with the Holy Family in a Hogan (the traditional Navajo eight-sided home) instead of a manger. It really surprises me no one came up with an idea like that before. I'd think they could sell hundreds of them in the souvenir shops. It's precisely the kind of souvenir many tourists would love. Mr. Yazzie agreed that he and his daughter would try to come up with something, and we said our final goodbyes to him and to Steve. Shortly after 8:00 we were on our way.

We started out this morning re-tracing our tracks from yesterday, heading north from Thoreau to Crownpoint. We stopped again at Basha's, where we got some coffee and rolls. (Fortunately, neither of them was frozen.) We set off again down Indian road 9, but this time we didn't turn off to go to Grants. Instead we kept heading eastward toward Torreon and Cuba. It's really quite rugged country in here, and it's fascinating how the scenery changes from wet to dry and back again. The road winds through assorted minor passes. It's not a route you'd want to make time on, but it made for a delightful drive this morning. **[This is one of the nicest drives I've ever taken—really delightful.]**

Shortly past Crownpoint Margaret saw a bit of graffiti that she found interesting. It began with an expletive and then made reference to "dah skinwalker". Margaret tells me that this is part of Navajo legend. A skinwalker is a witch-like creature that can change its shape. Supposedly skinwalkers had been seen near Thoreau recently, and this may have referred to one of them. It amazes me that people would believe in stuff like this in this day and age, but then there are white people who believe in equally bizarre stuff.

As we drove we gradually changed Indians. The Navajo dominate northwestern New Mexico, as well as eastern Arizona. Central New Mexico is home to various tribes that are collectively known as the Pueblo. There is a big difference in how the two groups of Indians live, both traditionally and in modern times. The Navajo traditionally lived on the land in their hogans. Space was always important to them, and even today their "urban" communities are spread out beyond belief.

The Pueblo, by contrast, traditionally lived in towns that were like one big apartment building. They had and still have a very different attitude toward space and privacy than the Navajo. The Pueblo towns are much more tightly packed together. With modern construction, that makes them look much more like a typical Midwestern town—although generally a bit junkier.

We stopped for gas in Cuba, the most substantial town we passed through this morning. While Cuba has only 760 people, it appears to have business for five or six times that number. I think it's a major tourist center for the surrounding mountains. There's lots of motels here, and there's certainly not much else where you could stay in the area.

There was a fair amount of snow on the ground in Cuba. You still wouldn't say the ground was snow-covered, but there were at least as many snow patches as bare spots. It was also downright cold here. The wind was blowing fairly strongly, and the

temperature couldn't have been much above freezing. The weather made me ponder again what winter is really like down here. I always pictured New Mexico as the **SOUTH**west, with the emphasis on the sunny South. It apparently does get quite cold here, though. Steve assured me that the weather we had experienced (very cold nights, followed by cool but pleasant days) was pretty typical. ... Snow apparently isn't at all unusual, but it usually doesn't last all that long. It would be fascinating to spend a bit longer in that climate and find out what things are really like.

Our destination from Cuba was Los Alamos. If you check out a map, you will see that there is a highway (route 126) that runs directly between the two. Unfortunately that road is gravel (think of it, a gravel highway in this day and age), and it is closed in winter. So, instead of a direct trip of 60 miles, we took a round-about way that was over 100 miles long. We followed a highway through Gallina and Abiquiu (where there's a lovely reservoir), and then we followed U.S. 84 south to Espanola. I remember when I was here before reading the Espanola paper and hearing Steve describe the place. The paper made it seem really crime-ridden, and Steve made it sound like an utter dump. While I'm not sure I'd want to move to Espanola, I must say it seemed surprisingly pleasant as we drove through. At Espanola we turned west on a series of state highways, finally ending up at Los Alamos.

Los Alamos, you may recall, is where the Manhattan Project developed the first atomic bomb. I described it in detail in my earlier travelogue on the Southwest. Margaret had not been to the Los Alamos museum, so we stopped there. I again enjoyed their film, describing how they built a secret city in the middle of nowhere—a place so secret that babies had their birthplace listed as a post office box in Santa Fe. Today most of Los Alamos is no longer secret, and it has developed into one of the wealthiest and most beautiful communities in New Mexico.

We got a hint as to the wealth of the area when we wandered into a gift shop after seeing the museum. Margaret was looking for Indian souvenirs, and she thought she might find something she liked here. I'm sure she saw many things she liked, but I can't say either of us walked out with any of it. I doubt I could have afforded a shopping bag in the place, and I'm confident I couldn't have afforded an actual gift. Their prices appeared to start around \$100, and they went well into the thousands. I'd love to know how much of those incredible prices actually go to the people who make the stuff. Steve told us Mr. Yazzie never charged them more than fifty dollars for anything they bought from him.



Gift shop window – Los Alamos, New Mexico

We had a very late lunch at McDonalds in Los Alamos. I had gotten some McDonalds gift certificates for Christmas, and I was pleased to spend some of them to get an atomic quarter pounder. After eating we drove southward to Santa Fe. We hit a lot of traffic in the city, but it was still nothing compared to Albuquerque. We kept on highway 84 in Santa Fe and continued southward from there.

There were two destinations on the sign when we left Santa Fe. The ultimate destination was Roswell, which has made the news lately for a UFO sighting almost half a century ago. Most amazing, though, was that the next "town" was Cline's Corners, 40 miles away. Forty miles between towns is not that unusual, but Cline's Corners isn't really even a town. It's basically an exit on the interstate that is home to two gas stations and a gift shop.

We frequented all three of the businesses in Cline's Corners. We went through the gift shop mostly as an excuse to stretch. I picked up some more Pepsi memorabilia, as well as unique Southwestern candies—gumdrops made out of prickly pear cactus and gummi candies in the shape and flavor of chile peppers **[both of which weren't that bad]**. We then tried to buy coffee at one of the gas stations, only to be told they didn't have coffee. (I think that's the first time in my life I saw a convenience store with no coffee. **[In retrospect, my bet is the place was run by Mormons, for whom caffeine is forbidden.]**) Failing there, we tried the other gas station, which was oddly more of a gas station than a convenience store. They did have coffee, though, and we were on our way again.

Afternoon changed to evening while we were at Cline's Corner. As we set out eastward on I-40, it was quite suddenly very dark. That's probably as well. We saw this same road going the other direction less than a week ago. It wasn't very exciting then, and I doubt it improved much over the holidays.

Margaret was obviously getting tired as we drove. We talked a lot, and we listened to a tape of rousing Irish folk songs to help keep us awake. We stopped for gas in Tucumcari, pulling off that the same exit we were at before when we stayed at the Super 8. Margaret was amazed at her gas mileage. We got 39 mpg, which is apparently the best she's ever gotten. The wind must have pushed us all the way across eastern New Mexico. After we bought gas, we left Tucumcari, headed eastward to San Jon (a cultural mis-mash of a name if I ever heard one) and on into Texas.

I described the Texas panhandle as boringly flat before; it hadn't changed since we left it. Along the interstate it's much more developed than further north, but it's still far from the beauty spot of America. One of the things I wanted to see is right on the interstate here—the Cadillac Ranch, a "Stonehenge" of auto carcasses made famous in a Bruce Springsteen song. I can't say I saw it, though. The place obviously isn't lit up at night, so we must have just cruised past it without noticing.

After what seemed like forever (but was actually about another hour) we finally made it to Amarillo. "Yellow" (which is what it means in Spanish) is certainly a strange name for a city, and Amarillo seemed strange enough to fit the name. It's the only modern city I've ever seen that begins and ends abruptly, with no fringe of development on the edge of town. Driving in at night, we saw what looked like a wall of lights. Suddenly we crossed through the wall and had instantly gone from rural to urban. We would find out the next morning that the place ends as suddenly as it began.

Our motel was at Exit 72-B, which is the exit for Quarter Horse Boulevard, named after the National Quarter Horse Association, which is located across the street. The motel itself was located on the westbound access road for the interstate. The exit looked relatively normal from the highway, but it turned out to be quite an ordeal crossing under the interstate and getting to the motel. Eventually we made it, though, and we checked in and got a room assignment.

We were just getting settled into our room when we heard what sounded like a loud buzzer. It seemed to be coming from the part of the room by the TV, and I wondered if they had one of those alarms that sounds if the TV is unplugged. I pondered how we might have jostled the cord in just a few seconds in the room, but when I checked the TV it was clear it wasn't causing the noise. Next I checked the smoke detector, to see if somehow it had been set off. (I once stayed at a motel in Minnesota—also a Super 8—where the steam from the showers set off the smoke detectors; all night long I heard buzzing up and down the hall.) It also seemed normal, though. Both Margaret and I were dead tired, and we didn't want that awful buzzing to keep us up all night, so I went back to the office to see if we could get another room.

The woman at the desk seemed confused when I described the buzzing, but she was very pleasant about letting us switch rooms. I got the new key and we went down a different hallway to our second room. Unfortunately this one seemed to have the same buzzing problem. Again we checked the TV and the smoke detector. This time it seemed to me that the buzzing was coming from the bathroom, but again nothing in there appeared to be making a noise. I wondered if perhaps there was a vending machine or an icemaker above the room that was sending a vibration through the ceiling, so I went upstairs. There were indeed machines upstairs, but they seemed very quiet and they weren't directly over the room. So I went back to the office to switch to yet another room.

The clerk was again pleasant, but she was more hesitant about making this switch. They had no more non-smoking rooms, so this time she had to put us in a smoking room. That really didn't bother me, as long as it didn't buzz. I got the new key and went back to the second room to get our luggage and switch again.

As I was picking up bags I finally realized what was doing the buzzing. It was my overnight bag, and in particular the electric razor in it. I unzipped the side compartment, and sure enough somehow the shaver had been jostled just enough to switch it on. All this time that was what we were hearing. I was too embarrassed to admit to the desk clerk that it had been my razor all along, so Margaret and I sheepishly walked to the third room and kept our mouths shut. I only hope the housekeeper didn't spend all day trying to figure out what the problem was. I did at least find the courage to say things seemed to have cleared up when we switched rooms the last time. **[I've since had shavers turn themselves on while I was driving. Hearing an unfamiliar sound while speeding down the interstate is almost more unnerving than it was in a hotel.]**

We still hadn't eaten supper, so we drove to a Waffle House a couple exits down the interstate. It was roughly midnight, but the place was just getting into full swing. Waffle House is a fascinating place to watch people, and I enjoyed doing this as I ate my omelette and hash browns. Eventually we made it back to the motel and went to sleep.

S*ATURDAY* D*ECEMBER* 28

AMARILLO TEXAS TO BEATRICE* NEBRASKA

(approximately 585 miles)

We slept in quite late this morning, still recovering from our long day and late night yesterday. **[We really should have stopped in Tucumcari last night and started out early this morning.]** We watched just a bit of television—mostly cartoons on Univisión, the other Spanish network. Before too long we were showered and packed and back on our way home.

Amarillo ends just as abruptly as it began. At least there's a reason for it, though. East of Amarillo is an industrial park that as far as I can see has just two companies. The first is an enormous IBP packing plant. The other is Pantex, which is the reason the city ends so abruptly.

I pondered just what Pantex was when I browsed through the Amarillo phone book and saw they had an evacuation plan for Pantex. Then I remembered a documentary I saw on the Discovery Channel. I recently watched that show again, and it reminded me that Amarillo's reason for being was and still is the arms race. Pantex isn't just your everyday factory; it's a high security facility, and for darned good reasons. They used to assemble nuclear bombs here. Since the end of the Cold War, they've reversed the assembly lines; now they're dismantling warheads, which they in turn store in cement buildings right here. There are now over 10,000 plutonium

bomb cores stored at Pantex, and they add over a thousand more to the stockpile each year. Scary as that is, I must say it was interesting to see the place where the bomb was born and the place they're burying it back to back.

Perhaps needless to say you can't see anything except a sign for Pantex from the highway. The plant itself is surrounded by miles and miles of ranchland. It's a lot like the buffer zone around the ammunition plant in Burlington, but larger. The buffer zone starts at the Amarillo city limits and continues eastward for about twenty miles. That seems like a lot, but if one of those warheads were to blow, you wonder if it would be enough. There was one thing that was reassuring: the main Pantex evacuation routes lead to the Tri-State Fairgrounds, which was right next to our hotel.

We followed U.S. 60 northeast from Amarillo. We were looking for a good place to have breakfast. There are several significant towns around here—Panhandle, Pampa, Miami—but none of them seemed to have much of anywhere to eat. Eventually we got to the town of Canadian. All we could find for food was a Dairy Queen, but both Margaret and I were getting fairly hungry. We decided Dairy Queen would do, so we ended up having blizzards for breakfast.

Just past Canadian we re-entered Oklahoma. We spent much of the day in that state, winding through towns and forever switching from one highway to another. We followed U.S. 60, state highway 15, U.S. 412, U.S. 60 again, state highway 8, U.S. 64, and finally U.S. 81. We went through countless towns (Oklahoma **never** bypasses towns), but you've probably never heard of any of them.



Glass Mountain area, Oklahoma

Oklahoma is not an unattractive state, but there's nothing really outstanding about it; it's a lot like Iowa that way. The most interesting thing we saw in Oklahoma was the Glass Mountain region near Orienta. These hills look a lot like the Badlands in South Dakota, but they have shiny crystal formations in them from which they get their name. We saw a completely different, but also interesting sight when we stopped for gas in Woodward. The place sold every kind of alternative fuel you could imagine. They had a whole bank of pumps dispensing all sorts of fuels I'd never heard of, at prices ranging from \$1.59 to \$3.89 a gallon.

I read through the local papers from everywhere we drove along today. One of the most interesting features to read was the church listings. It's fascinating how different the mix of churches is in different parts of the country. In the Southwest there appear to be three main choices: Catholic, Mormon, or "fundy". The number of each type of church varies, but those are pretty much the only types. With only a few exceptions (like the Methodists in Gallup), you don't see much in the way of "mainline Protestants". As we drove northward, the mixture changed quite a bit. All the various Pentecostal denominations gave way to more traditional Baptists, which in turn gave way to Presbyterians and Lutherans. In Oklahoma City they even have a (as in **one** in a city of half a million) church of my own denomination, the United Church of Christ. By the time we got to Kansas, the Baptists were outnumbered by the Methodists, and things started to really seem like the Midwest.

It's also amazing just how many churches these days serve minority members. Even in the tiniest little towns—places that looked lily white on the surface—there are churches that offered services in Spanish or in Asian languages. Catholics and Methodists

seem to have the biggest commitment in this area. There are lots of foreign language Pentecostal churches, too, but they are separate churches rather than a special ministry within an established church. It does tell you how our country is changing that there are so many second-language churches in places like Oklahoma and Kansas.

It was well past noon when we crossed into Kansas. We cut across the extreme south edge of the state by Caldwell and got on the turnpike at Exit 4. Just south of Wichita we stopped at a service area for a late lunch. This place also had one of those penny-crushing machines, but with a different design. We couldn't resist getting a second tacky copper souvenir, this time with a covered wagon on it.

We exited the turnpike at El Dorado. This time we did still have our toll ticket, which was a good thing. The toll was less than a dollar for the short distance we drove. If I had lost the ticket, we would have had to pay around five dollars.

We followed U.S. 77 northward across Kansas. The atlas marks many parts of this road as scenic. It's certainly not ugly, but I can't say there was anything to slow us down. Kansas is a lot like Oklahoma, fairly attractive, but numbingly dull at the same time.

Our next stop was in Junction City, which I know primarily as where they rented the Ryder truck that was used in the Oklahoma City bombing. When we pulled off for gas, I was surprised at how ethnically diverse the town was. Most of the customers at the gas station were black. If someone asked me to imagine small-town Kansas, one thing I wouldn't think of is black people. In the local paper there were advertisements in Spanish, and the church listings offered services in Spanish, Korean, and some Asian language about which I have no clue (the listing was printed in that language, with no translation.) For all its diversity and for its infamous place in modern history, Junction City seems like a very pleasant little town. It has several prosperous new housing developments and a handsome shopping strip.

We continued northward on U.S. 77. The area just north of Junction City is lake country, and it looked as if it would be beautiful—if we could have seen it. Unfortunately it was dark as we drove along. The one thing we could not help but see was a major fire burning in the middle of the country. It looked out of control to me, but we did see the flashing lights of an emergency vehicle, so at least someone was making an attempt to stop the flames.

Soon we came to the town of Marysville. I had last been through here when I was in college and I went out to Denver to visit a friend. Marysville had really gone all out for the holidays. The whole town was a sea of lights, and it really made for a pretty drive as we passed through.

Before long we crossed into Nebraska. In contrast to Marysville, the town of Wymore, Nebraska is the only town either Margaret or I could think of that had no public Christmas decorations whatsoever. Even Cylinder (a nothing little place between Algona and Emmetsburg) puts plastic candy canes under their streetlights for the holidays. Wymore had a few homes with nice decorations, but the town itself had absolutely nothing on display. **[This has become more common, both for legal reasons and expense. It's still the norm, though, for towns to put up decorations.]**

Wymore was a disappointment, but from there it wasn't far to our destination of the night, Beatrice (bee-AT-riss). For miles before we actually arrived in Beatrice, we saw the most beautiful building, all outlined in white lights. It turned out to be the Gage County Courthouse, an old brick and stone building with an iron clock tower on top. It was absolutely gorgeous and made a nice welcome to town.

We checked into the Beatrice Super 8, which is at the bottom of a major depression and looks as if it would flood in a drought. This was my least favorite of the motels where we stayed. I can't say exactly what I didn't like about it, but it was smaller and just not quite as nice as the other places. After we got settled in the room, we scanned through the phone book to see where we could eat. We settled on the Black Crow, a restaurant right downtown. I expected it to be little more than a bar and grill, but it was really quite elegant. They had restored an old commercial building and turned it into the trendy sort of place you'd expect to find in Iowa City. The ceiling was absolutely gorgeous, dark green with gilded highlights; and the furnishings (including one of the largest bars I've ever seen) were beautifully restored. **[I think the place has since gone out of business—which is too bad.]** The food was less than spectacular. I had what essentially amounted to pork roast, although like everything on the menu it had a far more pretentious name. It wasn't that bad, but it was far from the best I've ever eaten. **[It was under-seasoned, which is most unusual in such a pretentious restaurant—though probably typical for rural Nebraska.]** It was also the most expensive meal I ate on this trip, and definitely not the best (which was probably the one at the Holiday Inn in Tucumcari—not counting the ones Steve and Terry were gracious enough to serve us, of course).

We drove around for a while looking at Beatrice's Christmas decorations. While we were driving everywhere we looked there seemed to be a police car. Beatrice isn't much larger than Algona, and while you'd see a couple of cops out on a Saturday night here, you certainly wouldn't expect to run into them everywhere. In Beatrice they were really omnipresent, though. Back at the hotel I read the local paper and was intrigued by the police log. For all those cops, they don't seem to give out any huge amount of tickets. The strangest thing was what they did ticket people for. Instead of OWI or no seat belt or speeding, the big thing here is "demonstrating acceleration". I suppose that's what we called "peeling out" when I was growing up. That was always a warning when I was a kid, and I think that's what the local cops here in Algona do with it, too. I don't know that we saw anyone peeling out in Beatrice, but I suppose with all those cops around the local kids don't dare do anything of the sort.

One last thought for the day. We knew in Beatrice that we were back in the Midwest. There was patchy snow, but it was **COLD**. The temperature was about 5° when we arrived in town, and it was expected to be well below zero overnight. Fortunately the air conditioner at the Super 8 also served as a heater, and it warmed the room adequately so we could sleep.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 29

BEATRICE NEBRASKA TO ALGONA IOWA
(approximately 320 miles)

We slept fairly late again, and then packed up our stuff one last time. Margaret noticed as we were packing that the tire on the rear passenger's side looked low. I figured this was just a natural settling because of the sudden cold, but Margaret said that the last time she had changed her oil they had told her there was a slow leak in the tire. That was thousands of miles ago. It hadn't caused any problems since then, so Margaret suggested we find a gas station and just inflate it to the proper pressure.

[I must say I am both amused and frustrated by the things that Margaret is and isn't concerned about. She leaves her lights when she stops for gas, but she doesn't change her tire for thousands of miles after being told it has a leak. I suppose we all have such quirks, but it's weird that my sister's are almost exactly opposite mine.]

We left the motel and stopped briefly at McDonalds to catch a bite of breakfast. They were passing out flyers that we were supposed to use to vote for the NBA all-star team. Margaret and I amused ourselves by going through the list and seeing just how many of the "famous" athletes we knew. I must confess basketball is not something I follow much. I know about Michael Jordan, and I've heard of a few other big names, but beyond that I doubt if I could name more than ten pro basketball players if you paid me. There were dozens of potential "all-stars" on this list, but they weren't big enough names to enter my world.

After breakfast we drove a few miles west of Beatrice to Homestead National Monument. I'd been here years ago, shortly after I started teaching at Garrigan. Margaret had never been here though, and I was interested to see what the place was like in winter. What it is like is empty. We were here for well over an hour, and the whole time no other visitors showed up. We also noticed that yesterday only two people signed the guest register.

They have so few visitors mostly because it's largely an outdoor monument, and it's darn cold in winter. The ranger seemed surprised to see us, and she commented repeatedly on how cold it was. It was around zero, but the wind wasn't terribly strong, and it was a crisp, beautiful day. We bundled up and enjoyed an invigorating winter hike.

Homestead National Monument preserves one of the first claims filed under the U.S. Government's Homestead Act. That's the act that gave free land to people who moved in, became permanent settlers, and established working farms. It was the Homestead Act that the Ingalls family used to move from Wisconsin to Kansas to Minnesota to South Dakota in the *Little House* books. It lived on even into the 1970s, when the last homestead claim was filed in Alaska. There are actually several claims that could be argued to be the "first", but Daniel Freeman's claim in Gage County, Nebraska is the one the park service chose to preserve as a means of honoring the pioneers of the West.

Today the monument includes a modest visitors' center with a museum and film explaining what life was like in homesteading days. There is a separate museum displaying modes of transportation from the 1800s (buggies, sleighs, etc.). One of the strangest items in the visitors' center is a "cold mangle". A homemaker would use this monstrosity in lieu of an iron, even though it's about the size of my bathroom. She would wind clothes around a huge drum and then force an enormous weight (made of stones) on top of the clothes. The weight smoothed out the clothes, just as the heat and steam of an iron does. There's a taped description of the machine that notes that the woman who owned it used it well into the 20th century, long after she had electricity available. She found a major advantage in that the mangle did not heat up her house in summer.

On the grounds of the monument is a restoration of an original log cabin from the area. Here I got a real feel for what life must have been like in the "little houses" on the prairie. I had never really thought just how many people crammed into these tiny little cabins. It's not unlike the enormous Third World families who cram into efficiency apartments. It had also never really registered (probably since I don't think I'd ever seen a log cabin in winter before) that these places had virtually no insulation. At best some animal skins or maybe some tar paper might line the walls, but there was almost nothing to keep out the cold. As I stood in the entrance to this log cabin, I could really picture a pioneer family huddled together in the cold, with no one to rely on but each other. It really is amazing that we're all alive today, when you think that almost all of us whose families have been in this country more than a century have ancestors who lived in similar conditions.

Actually, according to the Park Service, the log cabin was considered luxurious by homestead standards. They were typical in this area, which is near a river and therefore heavily wooded. Further west there were no trees to use for wood. That's where people lived in "soddies", homes actually built of bricks of sod.

The Park service is in the continual process of restoring the area to its original prairie appearance. It's a strange sight to hike through the prairie grass in winter, and it's even stranger to look just beyond the park boundary and see housing developments and modern fields. It does make a startling contrast, which they even mention in their trail guide. One thing I'd suggest the Park Service consider is to actually create a working farm on the site to demonstrate the farming methods of the 1860s. Among other things, I think it would be fascinating to see the size of farm that was considered typical in that era, compared with what you see in Nebraska today.

[They've done A LOT of additional work at Homestead in the intervening years. They've got a luxurious (and extremely "green" new visitors' center in addition to the old one. They've done a lot more prairie restoration and have a rather intricate network of trails now. There's still no working farm, though, and I still think that would be a good addition.]

We left the monument and drove back into Beatrice, stopping briefly at a Total station to add air to the tire. We got it blown up okay, and everything seemed fine. Then we set off northward again, heading down U.S. 77 toward Lincoln. At Lincoln we picked up Interstate 80. I must say I liked seeing the big "80" on the interstate sign. Somehow in my mind interstate numbers like "40" and "25" seem distant and strange. Interstate 80 was the interstate when I was growing up, and it will always have a hint of home to me.

The pavement of I-80 was constantly changing, and much of it was quite rough. It made for very noisy driving. Because of that it was no surprise when about 15 miles east of Lincoln we heard the rough noise of friction on the road. It soon registered, though, that we were driving on concrete at this point. Moreover, Margaret noticed a bit of pulling on the car. She pulled over, and it's a good thing she did. The tire that had been low was now totally flat, smoking from being drug along without air.

I've changed tires several times in my life, and I've never had much of a problem with it. In fact I've always wondered about people who call people to come and change the tire for them. I, however, live in town and do virtually all my driving on good-quality sealed roads. Margaret lives well out in the country on a dusty gravel road. I think I already mentioned that the back hatch to her car would not open, because dust and ice had locked it shut. That meant that to get the spare tire we had to unpack everything in the back seat and everything we had stored behind in the hatch. We piled it all beside the car on the shoulder. Then we fumbled around on the floor of the hatch to release the tire. (There was an additional complication in that at first we could not find the jack, but we did manage to find it in a little hole in the body of the car.)

Once we finally managed to get the spare out, we got the car jacked up and started to take the nuts off the flat tire. When I've changed a tire on my car, this was never a problem. At worst the place that they put on the tire might have over-tightened the nuts, which would force me to work a little harder to get them off. The nuts on Margaret's car, however, were worse. They were all but permanently rusted on. I put all my strength into it, to the point that I'd swear I might have had a heart attack. Finally I managed to get them to budge.

On my car, once you get the nuts off, the wheel just slips right off. Then you put on the spare, screw down the nuts, and you're done—simple enough. I got the nuts off, but Margaret's wheel wouldn't budge. I checked to see if there was some nut I had missed or if there was a catch or something holding it on. There wasn't. Instead the wheel was rusted right onto the axle. I tried and tried, and so did Margaret, but neither of us could get it to budge one millimeter.

It took better than half an hour to accomplish this. Hundreds if not thousands of cars sped by at 75mph and better, and not one pulled over to offer help. I can't say I blame anyone. I never know what to do myself when I see someone at the side of the road. I'm no mechanic; there's probably nothing I could do to help if I wanted to. So usually I just speed along myself, often saying a little prayer that everything will work out okay. I assume that before long there will be a highway patrol officer who really can help out. That's what we assumed here, too. When it became quite clear that there was no way we were going to get the wheel to budge, we packed our stuff back into the back seat, sat in the car and waited ... and waited ... and waited.

Let me tell you, if you ever want to go speeding down the highway without getting caught, Nebraska is the place to do it. All together we waited better than an hour, without seeing a single cop on either side of the road. Margaret considered trying to walk somewhere to get help, but there wasn't really anywhere to go. On an interstate there aren't any farm houses around where you could go, and we were almost exactly halfway between exits—a good five miles to the nearest one. So we sat ... and sat ... and sat.

Eventually help did come, in the form of a man who looked like those mug shots on "America's Most Wanted". A heavysset, forty-something, long-haired man pulled up behind us in an oversized pick-up. Even as all those horror stories you hear about on the highway went through my head, I opened the door, and went out to talk to him.

The man and his wife were on their way to a Christmas party. They had by apparently driven by us before, thought about it, and then driven back to see if they could help. Regardless of his appearance, the man was both willing and able to offer the help we needed. He had a can of Rustoleum in his car that he sprayed liberally all over the wheel. He also had a sledge hammer. He gave the wheel a few blows, but still nothing moved. Then he crawled under the car. This made Margaret and I wince, since our father was killed when he was trapped underneath a vehicle that fell off a jack. The guy went under the car without hesitation, though, and he whacked the backside of the wheel with all his might. Finally it gave a little. After a few more squirts of Rustoleum and a few more blows with the hammer, it creaked and groaned and finally came off.

Once the wheel was off, we got the spare on. Unfortunately, like most modern cars, Margaret's car has only a high-pressure "doughnut" spare. Tires like that are designed mostly to get you to a tire dealer. At high speeds they overheat badly and can blow out. I have never understood why carmakers have gone to putting those stupid little spares on cars; I'd pay extra to have a real spare that I could drive on with confidence. We didn't this time, though. We had to find a place to get a new tire—not a real good position to be in when we were in the middle of nowhere in rural Nebraska on a Sunday.

[I've since had two tires on my current car go flat—both in winter. I discovered one of the flats in a hotel parking lot in Chicago; the other went flat on a stretch of I-80 in rural Illinois. I discovered that on my Metro, as on Margaret's Toyota, the wheels rust onto the axles. That's apparently a very common problem on modern cars. I acquired a full-sized spare for the Metro (which also came with a donut). I found out later, though, that the wheel I had was designed for an older model and didn't fit properly onto the axles on my car. I really do wonder why they don't standardize things more.]

The man who helped us get the wheel off said we should ask at the truck stop at the next exit; they should be able to help us, he said. Margaret eased onto the interstate and chose a happy medium between driving fast enough so as not to disrupt traffic and

driving slow enough to not overheat the spare tire. **[That's no easy trick on a road with a 75mph speed limit.]** It seemed like forever, but eventually we made it to Exit 420.

There was indeed a truck stop at the Greenwood exit, an Amoco station with a restaurant and convenience store. It even looked as if there was an actual service station area, which definitely got our hopes up. We went into the convenience store and explained our problem to the clerk. Our brightened hopes sank when he explained that no one in the service area worked on Sunday. I had visions of getting another motel room, just an hour away from where we stayed last night.

The clerk was helpful. He made a phone call and directed us to a truck repair place that was a few hundred feet away from the exit, along old US 6. We used the restroom (which I had needed to do since before the tire went flat to begin with) and bought a couple of token items in the convenience store to show our appreciation. Margaret also got some cash at an automatic teller, since we had no idea how much we might get taken for. Then we drove over to the truck place.

The truck repair center was an enormous aluminum building with a tiny office and an enormous shop. A woman in the office first explained that their business was strictly cash; they accepted absolutely no credit. We agreed, and then she took us back to the bowels of the shop where we met a middle age man who could have been our father (thirty years ago). Our dad would have loved this place, too. It smelled of grease, and there was every kind of gadget imaginable. All over the place things were lying around in various states of disassembly. To some extent the down-home feel of the shop gave me a certain degree of confidence.

The man looked at the tire and quickly determined that it was beyond repair. He wasn't sure they would have one that fit in stock (this is a **truck** repair place, after all). Oddly enough, he had exactly one such tire, stored way up by the ceiling of his shop. He quickly got it mounted and balanced, and before long it was back on the wheel and ready to go. We went to the office, wondering what the bill would be. It turned out to be \$30, exactly the cost of the tire with no charge for labor. The man even suggested the secretary write "interstate service call" on the invoice, so Margaret could submit it to her insurance as a roadside claim. (I'm not sure if Margaret actually committed this minor fraud, but it was kind of the man to try to save us money.) We thanked the people at the truck center repeatedly and were soon on our way again.

I picked up one more fascinating newspaper while we were waiting to get the new tire. *The Trucker* is a free publication whose intended audience is obvious. Both its news and its ads are things of interest to the men and woman who drive eighteen wheelers. One of the most fascinating stories was on the collapse of a section of Interstate 5 after severe rains in Oregon. The sinkhole was so big that an entire semi fell into it. Another teetered on the edge and caught fire. Miraculously both drivers walked away. Almost an equal miracle was that the highway was re-opened just three days later. There were countless other highway-related articles. I won't bore you with them, but overall I found this one of the most fascinating newspapers I bought anywhere. **[Actually I didn't buy it; it was free.]**

Before long we made it to Omaha. We drove around the city on the beltway. Traffic was not light, but the beltway/downtown route system made things flow smoothly. We turned off at the next to last exit in Nebraska and headed northward on US 75 to Blair.

We stopped at a Burger King in Blair. It seems I've used the words "very late lunch" almost every single day of this trip. After all the time we took to deal with the tire, this "lunch" ended up being closer to dinnertime than lunchtime. We enjoyed some more people watching at Burger King. One interesting person was an employee in a wheelchair. He parked his car, got in his wheelchair, and came on into the restaurant. I'm not sure I've ever seen a handicapped person get out of a car by himself before. I'd be interested to know how this guy became handicapped. He looked like he could have been a star athlete just months ago. He certainly had more than enough upper body strength to lift himself from the car to the wheelchair.

Another interesting person was a Hispanic child who sat at the table near us. While he was eating three older kids came in, looking cool in Starter jackets they had obviously received for Christmas. They sat down, and the little boy gawked at them as if he were in awe of these heroes. Eventually the little boy went up and hesitantly said hello to them. To the boys' credit, they were very polite to him. It's not like they invited him to sit down, but they did respond to him nicely. You'd think the little boy had talked to the superstars those Starter jackets try to emulate. He was in seventh heaven to actually have these "big studs" speak to him. (Never mind the "big studs" were maybe twelve years old, tops.) The little boy's mother was so impressed that when she and her kid left, she thanked the big boys for being so nice to her son. They just shrugged it off, which seemed like the right reaction to me. Courtesy shouldn't be something you have to be thanked for; it should be routine. Obviously the mother has met people for whom that was not true. It's good to know that at least three boys in Blair, Nebraska, can be both cool and nice at the same time and that for them being nice is no big deal.

After lunch we crossed the Missouri River and were once again in Iowa—at least briefly. After just a few miles in the Hawkeye state, we turned into DeSoto Bend National Wildlife Refuge. This combination preserve and historic site is centered on an oxbow lake that used to be part of the Missouri River. Since state boundaries were drawn back when it was the Missouri, much of the wildlife refuge is actually in Nebraska, even though it's actually on the east side of the river.

For those who haven't been there, DeSoto is one of the most interesting parks in or near Iowa. From my point of view, the fact that it is a wildlife refuge is incidental. More importantly, it preserves the remains of the steamship Bertrand, which crashed here back in the 1800s. Their museum has everything they found from the ship—china, groceries, clothing, furniture—all preserved in a controlled environment room. You can also see the remains of the ship itself. It's really a fascinating place.

It is, of course, first and foremost a wildlife refuge. They combine the dual roles by making it sort of a nature park for visitors. There is a lovely system of trails, and Margaret and I tried a bit more hiking. The ground was completely snow-covered, but they had

maintained the trail. I'm not sure I've ever gone hiking through snow before, and it was fun to do so. **[I've been back in every season since, and it always makes a fascinating hike.]**

Winter is the slow season for DeSoto, but we were by no means the only visitors. Unlike Homestead, there were other cars in the parking lot. Ours were definitely not the first footprints through the snow on the trails, either. It is a beautiful park in winter; I can understand why people would brave the cold to see it.

We left DeSoto right at their 5:00 closing time, and it was dark as we drove onward. Southwest Iowa is the part of the state I know the least about, but it still seemed like home. **[I've gotten much more familiar with the area in recent years, as I've driven back and forth to Omaha for baseball games.]** We stopped only once more, to get gas. Otherwise we drove straight through via Denison, Carroll, and Fort Dodge. Finally, with the clock going on 9pm, we arrived in Algona.

I had almost nothing on hand to eat, so we drove out to the local Happy Chef for supper. **[Ours, like almost every other Happy Chef, has since closed. The location was a sports bar for a while, and it's now a Mexican restaurant called Cinco de Mayo.]** Then we went back to my place, called the relatives to let them know we'd made it back okay, unpacked, and finally settled into bed.

There was one more little surprise when I unpacked. Buried in the newspapers I had saved was a little 3x5 card with a computer bar code printed on it—the ticket for the Kansas Turnpike we had lost a week ago. Since we didn't have to pay any more than we would have anyhow, it makes a unique souvenir of the trip.

This was a really fascinating journey. It was fun to travel at Christmas and see a different part of the country in a season other than summer. It was also great to see Steve and his family, and we certainly had a merry Christmas together. I hope the holidays were good for all of you, too, and I wish all of you a very happy new year!