

1993

Happy Holidays from Seymour

Yes, we're still in Seymour, and very gradually growing accustomed to life in the middle. This has been my year to learn to enjoy what Central Illinois and University life have to offer, and cease griping about what they don't. The physical terrain hasn't improved, and I still end one trip by planning another, but my outlook is better. (Chip might beg to differ, but I insist I've become positively cheerful.)

On the work front, Chip continues at too fierce a pace in too many different directions, but he has some interesting projects and even more interesting students. Just this week he's finally settled a contract with the National Science Foundation to work with colleagues to develop a "community of teachers, researchers, scientists and school administrators to support teacher-initiated action research on science and math in the classroom." All of the participants will be linked electronically, teachers will identify a particular problem they want to address in their classrooms and seek help from university people, present their research to the group on a regular basis---all of this to serve as a model for how other such communities might work. As you might have guessed, collaboration is a new watch-word in education, and this is on such a scale that they will need my assistance to help hold it together. I'm working on another project with Chip, evaluating the efforts of some University science undergraduates to bring more interactive science experiences into elementary classrooms, so we're spending more time together. It's a bit strange but kind of fun.

The kids are in that charming pre-adolescent stage where they can be quite delightful most of the time. They survive well on long car trips, which became clear last summer when we made them drive from here to the East Coast via Algonquin Park in northern Ontario. We canoed for four days through a series of beautiful small lakes and learned that the kids could actually carry a small load on the portages with only minimal complaints. Of course Emily spent the entire trip wearing mosquito headgear and the black flies were so ferocious that all of us were ready to call it quits a day early. (Next time we'll put up with other canoeists and go later in the season.) But it was a great first foray into the wilderness with them.

We did manage an embarrassingly large number of other trips this year. We blame it on the family diaspora, but we are fortunate to have been able to get about so much. Spent time in California with my family, in Boston with old friends, on Cape Cod at Aunt Polly's, in New Jersey with sisters; in the spring Chip and I had a wonderful two day drive alone down the Big Sur coast. We also checked out the Gulf Coast, enjoying a week at the beach on Galveston Island with the Texas family, a reunion of ten altogether. In early December we left the kids behind when I accompanied Chip to a conference in Charleston, South Carolina, where we were joined by his parents. During that long weekend we managed a quick side trip to Savannah to see Chip's Aunt Betty's clan and had a whirlwind tour of that lovely city.

The big trip of the year was Chip's, and his alone. He was asked to lead a delegation of reading teachers and researchers to China, an opportunity he couldn't pass up. They spent time in Beijing, Wuxu, Nanjing and Shanghai, visiting schools and meeting with Chinese educators. It was a fascinating if grueling three weeks, and I hope he'll have time to tell many friends and relations some of his stories in person. He hopes he's established some contacts that make future trips possible, as do those of us he left behind.

Of course, our little prairie dogs spend most of their travel time with noses buried in books, only occasionally looking up to announce something like "mountains, mountains, trees, trees, at least in Illinois the landscape varies!???" This spring we'll probably leave the trees and varied landscape in in our own neighborhood behind when we move into town. Our house is currently on the market, and as soon as it sells or we find something in the neighborhood near the University, we'll make another move. We've enjoyed being in the "suburban country", but life will be much easier when we move closer to the locus of most of our activities. It would be nice for our budding pianists to walk over to the Conservatory (this year both can actually play carols that we can sing along with), or to school, or the library, or friends' houses. And it would be nice for Chip to be able to hold seminars at home, and for me to attend night meetings in the neighborhood. I keep trying to minimize my involvement in community projects, but as soon as I get rid of one (the building a new children's museum project) another one takes its place (the reform TV project.)

Thanksgiving most of my family came to us, which was wonderful. Our Christmas with only the four of us will seem too quiet after that, but the next day we're heading for Wellfleet on Cape Cod (whence I will probably be addressing this, post Christmas) so we'll have the company of Chip's Aunt Polly, who's celebrating her 88th year. We anticipate long quiet walks on a chilly beach and lots of reading time, though Chip will very like carry a laptop computer and a pile of student dissertations to read.

A very dear friend here lost her son to a random street shooting last year in Atlanta and galvanized me to do what small things I can about our increasingly violent society. The heightened violence threshold on TV (and, of course, gun control) seemed good places to start. Yes, I know they're only symptoms of bigger problems, but where else to begin? It helps to look at television, particularly local news, through the eyes of a seven year old—it excites a certain desire for activism.

On this sober note, I shouldn't close, so I'll relay some of Stephen's better questions this year. As Emily says, he still suffers from "questionitis." Chip sent this to one of his colleagues while they were still fresh in his mind:

- Why aren't there waves in a bucket?
- Why does "Chicago" sound like a Mexican name?
- Are there people who run faster backwards than forwards?
- Who makes the best soy sauce?
- Do any amphibians have wings?

- Which is the smallest amphibian?
- Why is it that when you rock a baby in your arms you rock head to toe, but
• ! when you rock one in a cradle you rock sideways? • If rain comes from the ocean, why isn't it salty?

You're all welcome to submit answers by email or by what some snobbish initiates of "cyberspace" refer to as snail mail.

But we wish you all lots of time to fool about, convey our apologies as always for the annual word-processed letter, and send best wishes for a good 1994.

Next year the kids will write the letter.