

November 1994

Fall Greetings from the North Woods of Urbana, Illinois

How's this for an early start to a holiday letter? The hidden agenda: we've moved and if we want to hear from any old friends and relations, we know we have to get the new address and our tales from the Midwest out there first---not to mention the feelings of guilt that receiving a first holiday form letter might inspire in our far-flung correspondents.

The central dilemma in this kind of letter is what person to assume. The royal *We* was my inclination several years ago, when I first attempted a holiday letter. But as many know, it is really I, Susan/Sue/Susie (that's another problem...) who tries to pull this off. Chip and the kids read it and delete, but rarely add items. However, this year the kids have added a few words, and Stephen, a creature of habit, thought the traditional drawing of a pig should be included as well.

1994 finds us in a new house, which has radically improved my appreciation of Central Illinois. Our children feel as though they have always lived on the Prairie, but the first few years here were intolerably hard for me and an adjustment for Chip, as well. It was like moving to a foreign country, without benefit of the language. But this new old house on about 2 wooded acres, 5 minutes from school and 7 minutes from work, has been a pleasure ever since we moved in June. This part of the country is sorely lacking in trees, but in our micro-environment we have probably a dozen large oaks, some of them over two hundred fifty years old. (Chip and Stephen counted the rings on one stump and marked the dates for important events like the Civil War and the birthdates of the American Girl dolls. For those who don't know, these are beautiful expensive historical dolls that come with mini reading series. Our children date all events from these dolls. When we saw a Lincoln marker one said, "Addy would have been 5 years old then." To a mother celebrating one too many

birthdays: "Molly was already 13 when you were born.")

Earlier this month it was raining black walnuts and hickory nuts. If we were so inclined, we could fill hundreds of leaf bags, but we're cheerfully leaving most to compost in place---and our friendly neighbors in the distance on either side do more or less the same, so it's a supportive culture. The fall colors were wonderful, and with the slight rise in our land (you have to live here for a while to call it a hill), it could be New England.

Which is not to say that we don't miss the Northeast. Illinois is still much too far from the ocean, so I stole away alone to spend a few days in August with Aunt Polly on Cape Cod. And all of us sojourned for a wonderful three weeks in California with my family in June, a poorly-timed trip as we had just moved, but a sorely-needed break. Chip managed to do very little work, I did virtually none, we took no laptop computer and never logged into our email. Instead, we spent a week at Lake Tahoe (where Chip's sister Karen joined us), more time in the Bay Area, and a couple of days without children, thanks to their grandparents, in Yosemite. The park had dramatically changed since the summer of 1969 when I worked there as a waitress, but once I got over the shock and we headed for a deserted trail instead of a packed minibus, it was as beautiful as ever.

Another trip of note was Chip and Stephen's visit to Toronto in May. Chip was slated to give a talk at a conference there and had decided to start taking one or the other child along on these junkets. It beats school for learning opportunities and Emily anxiously awaits her turn.

On Veterans Day we bravely sent both children off on their first solo flight, from Indianapolis to Orlando, where my sister and her husband were lying in wait with Disney tickets in their pockets. All seemed fine as I watched their plane speed down the runway and I debated whether to try to find out if it were actually airborne. But the gate was deserted by then and I was trying hard not to

be an overly anxious mother, so I proceeded on to a museum conference in Chicago. Meanwhile the pilot decided that the throttle wasn't working and taxied back to the gate. So there they were, paging Mom with no luck. Chip, working at home and awaiting the call saying they had arrived safely in Florida, heard instead from Emily on a pay phone that a nice Mr. Reeves, a fellow passenger, had given her some change to call with the news. But then she was cut off, not having deposited enough money. You can imagine Chip's frame of mind. About 50 phone calls later, with Karen working on the Florida end and Chip cancelling all meetings in preparation to race 130 miles to Indianapolis, all was arranged and they were routed through Charlotte. Their dinner that night: the crackers and leftover Halloween candy Mom had packed and many bags of US Air peanuts. It was an adventure that will fill the pages of their school journals for weeks to come. And Disney World was pretty good, too, by all accounts.

When not traveling, the kids are thriving, though their mother has succumbed to the temptation to sign them up for everything. So they played some tennis this fall, they sing in the school choir and have joined the regional Children's Chorus (I was seduced by the thought of going with them to Vienna, as last year's chorus did---imagine a diverse bunch of American kids with funny hairdo's singing in the home of the Vienna Boys Choir!) Then there's Cub Scouts, drama, violin, recorder, piano, and Lego Logo. This small university town offers much and makes it too easy to move from one activity to the next. Fortunately most of these are low key and many happen during or immediately after school.

After the move the kids continued in the same public school but we stopped paying tuition for the privilege. Both are in pretty nice classrooms, both 3-4 combinations, so Emily has the same teacher. We have the best of both worlds here, being close enough to get to playmates' houses, but secluded enough to not have an excessive amount of dropping in.

Chip meets with students, writes, teaches, consults in schools, attends too many committee meetings and in general continues to enjoy university life. He works round the clock, except when he's hauling firewood (four fireplaces in this house and many electrical storms in this region mean much firewood.) I've moved departments at the College of Education, into Curriculum and Instruction, just down the hall from Chip. I continue working on a couple of school-based research projects, but in a more interesting setting, and now have time for some work with graduate students. The current group is a fascinating polyglot mix from places as far-flung as New Orleans, Haiti, Ohio, Taiwan and suburban Chicago.

While Chip is at work with splitting mall and chainsaw, my creative instincts are satisfied by digging holes, planting herbs and tossing wildflower seeds in the woods to intermix with the daffodils. When I leave the garden the squirrels return to dig up whatever I've planted, and in the early evening the raccoons make their nightly rounds, from the neighbors who feed them dog food to our geranium pots where they dig for grubs. (Shortly after we moved in, one juvenile raccoon fell through the screen on a skylight and spent the better part of a night clinging to a plant bracket. The county sheriff dispatcher said he could send someone over to shoot it, but we declined the favor.) You see why I'm happier, there's so much to keep me busy.

We plan to drive to Texas for Christmas with Chip's family, perhaps via Mississippi, a part of the country we've never explored. Chip has brief work trips to Boston this fall, I have a winter trip to New York to look forward to, and we'll get to Chicago a few times. Beyond that we're trying to figure out where we might begin planning a sabbatical year in the fall of 1996. And before that, we need to think about someplace exotic for next summer. Any bright ideas among those out there on our mailing list?

We send our collective best wishes for happy holidays and a good 1995.