

Happy Holidays to scattered friends and relations:

Here's your usual summary from the Bruce Family, the high points of our Year 2000 condensed to a few pages---a wedding, a bicycle wreck, events theatrical, an electoral defeat.

March

At a lovely wedding in Austin, Texas, we welcomed the newest member of the Texas clan, Richard (Scooter) Thompson, who married our niece, Jennifer. This provided a fine occasion to catch up with Chip's extended family and to enjoy a southern week in mid-March, when our Central Illinois winter has begun to wear on us a bit. But as I write this, snow is falling and the prospect of skiing around our backyard once again allows us to forget what March can be like.

*O Boer Plaas Geboortegrond**

My sister and I took the trip of a lifetime, when we packed our mother off to South Africa for two weeks to see the house where she was born. Her family returned to the United States in 1922 when she was only five years old, but my grandmother had written wonderful letters during the seven years they lived in Cape Province, and her stories had inspired in my mother a deep longing to see the country again. During years of turmoil in South Africa there never seemed to be a good time to make the trip, so last winter we seized the moment. Sadly, it was not an ideal time for my father or my brother Kent to join us, but we managed to enjoy ourselves nevertheless.

Through a series of extraordinary circumstances and the kindness of strangers, we visited the house and farm in Wellington where my mother was born, and the large estate in Somerset West where she later lived as a child. At the archives in Cape Town, we found photographs of the Wellington farm and the Lourensford Estate, taken at about the same time that my grandmother was learning to serve tea to her English neighbors. At a small museum in Paarl, we met an elderly gentleman who was also studying his family history, and were astonished to discover that his family had owned the same farm where my mother was born. We even drove over Bain's Kloof---the mountain track where my grandparents' picnic was interrupted one stormy day in 1916 by a horde of baboons. We saw the cabin they took shelter in, and glimpsed the descendants of those very baboons as they retreated into the bush. The South Africa my grandparents lived in was, of course, a very different place. During our brief stay, we found ourselves moving across the boundaries of past and present, First and Third Worlds, Black and White and Indian and Coloured communities. I found it a strange, fascinating, and beautiful country. I hope to return one day, with the kids and Chip.

(*An article about our visit appeared in a local paper in Afrikaans with this headline from an old song, which means something like "O farmer's birth place" ---the kind of Afrikaner sentiment that makes South Africa such a complicated place.)

Theatrics and Athletics

The kids continue to be strong, good-looking, *and* above average, like all good citizens of Lake Wobegon. Our only concern is lack of sleep. Emily kept late hours in the spring, to take a role as a school girl/orphan in a University production of *Jane Eyre*; she didn't speak any lines, but she did sing a hymn and die of typhus while being transported on a cart. In the fall, she shifted to early-morning rising when she joined the swim team, which required entering the pool at 5:30 am---and of course, a parent had to transport her there. As soon as swimming ended, Stephen began keeping his late hours, with the start of basketball season. The opposing teams are all deep in the country, which means an hour-long bus ride. Fortunately it's a nice safe chartered bus, because his coach is in a wheelchair and needs a lift, but unfortunately that means it's equipped with a video screen, so instead of doing homework, the boys can watch films. We first encountered such a bus in China, where they showed the most amazingly violent movies I've ever seen, but now it seems video-equipped buses are everywhere, even on the Prairie.

The Bicycle Wreck

After years of threatening to give up our 25-year-old ten-speeds, we finally went out one weekend last spring and bought four new bikes. One week later, Chip and Stephen rode to the video store to buy some entertainment. Stephen very cautiously stopped at an intersection, as his mother had instructed, Chip swerved to avoid him, and broke his elbow. This put a serious dent in his ability to paddle a canoe, but he's fully recovered now, though he never did get enough sympathy.

Summer

Summer was filled with the usual activities: the kids volunteered at the library, Emily participated in yet another play, and both immersed themselves in Spanish at a language camp on Cass Lake, near Bemidji, MN, where the call of loons meets the twang of a Mexican guitar.

Father's Day in June found us sitting in an outdoor restaurant on a beach at Lake Tahoe with my Dad and Chip, a bottle of white wine, a lot of good food, and the usual Porter conversation---everyone talking at once and my mother reminiscing about the dances she used to attend in the 1930's, exactly where we were dining.

Work

Chip is enjoying his new department, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, while managing still to work with many friends and colleagues from Education. He's chronically over-the-top in his commitments---so what's new?---but I drag him away for the occasional weekend to places like Chicago. We just returned from one such getaway, to look at Christmas windows and vet the boyfriend of our Chinese "daughter" Liqian, who is now in a PhD program at the University of Chicago.

I haven't progressed much with my fantasy of the writer's life at home. I seem to lack the requisite discipline. I did manage to write a brief piece about my brother Mike and his battle with schizophrenia, which won second place in a local writing contest, but otherwise have occupied myself with sorting mountains of memorabilia and editing my grandmother's letters ---as well as, occasionally, Chip's journal column and Emily's newspaper column. She writes something called *Hit Return* every other week for the local paper and very much needs your contribution of interesting web sites to help her meet that relentless deadline: ebruce@uni.uiuc.edu.

In the Spring, my political efforts on behalf of the Urbana Library---extending the district to include outlying areas---failed, with the threat of the dreaded word, "taxes." Who would deny families living in trailer courts access to a library? Perhaps the votes were not properly counted?

Looking ahead

It's Emily's turn to accompany Chip on a work trip, so she gets to go to Athens in January for a weekend conference---Athens, Georgia that is. (Stephen did Toronto a few years ago.) Then, Emily has agreed that I may chaperone her Latin class trip to Rome in February, so I've been cleaning house with headphones on, practicing my *per piacere's* and *scusi's*. My sister will join me after the Latin kids leave, for a week in a small Roman apartment that we located through the wonders of the Web.

I always close these letters by promising to visit at least some of the recipients, but who knows? Emily has to learn to drive next summer and Driver's Ed takes many weeks; none of this practicing-in-a-parking-lot for today's teenagers. Stephen gets to spend a month in a wheelchair and on crutches, because he has to have a nevus (birthmark) removed from his leg. We also hope to gather with the Texans again to celebrate Chip's mother's 80th birthday in some style.

We'll keep you posted. Our very best wishes to one and all.
Susan, on behalf of all the Bruces

Now we'll see if a photograph will fit here, since we skipped it last year, and we are all much older and wiser.