

Washington, DC

National Quiz Bowl—2010



[UPDATE: February, 2016—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 photos to enhance the original travelogues. This is another travelogue that is being revised from a .pdf document and as such will have some differences from the original.]

It's a little strange writing this revision in the winter of 2016. Today (February 21) as I start on this, I just got back from visiting our former superintendent, Gene Meister, who is in hospice care. Chances are by the time I finish with the revision, he won't be around anymore. Gene has been battling cancer for the better part of a decade now. Partly as a reprieve from that, he and his wife and grandson came out to Washington to join us on the 2010 quiz bowl trip. We reminisced about that when I saw him this afternoon. It's weird to think the trip was six years ago, but Gene's grandson Andrew (who had just finished fifth grade at the time) is looking at colleges now. I know I'll be thinking of Gene a lot as I go through this revision, which may be a bit harder to write than some of the others.]

Garrigan has had a long tradition of success in quiz bowl. In fact, we celebrated the school's fiftieth anniversary last year, and one of the events that was part of the celebration was an alumni tournament that brought back many of those who had been to national tournaments in the past. **[Those involved still talk about the alumni quiz bowl. We'll probably revive it if they do summer activities for our sixtieth anniversary, and it also spawned an annual community quiz bowl tournament that continues to this day.]** I kept up that tradition in 2010. My "good" team handily won a tournament in Spirit Lake, and they finished in the top four at every regional tournament they entered. In addition each month they entered a "20 Questions" contest sponsored by the company that runs the National Academic Championships. That online competition **[which has since been discontinued]** tests research skills as much as knowledge, but either way Garrigan was among the top teams nationally every single month of the school year. We decided clear back in December that we'd be making a return trip to nationals (our eleventh overall).

Between the extreme winter weather and a rush of events in the spring, the trip kind of snuck up on me this year. It seemed that before I knew it, it was May. Our seniors were graduating, and the journey to Washington was just around the corner. This ended up being one of the least planned trips we've done, but it was a good one—and a very successful one—nonetheless.

For the past fifteen years or so, the National Academic Championships have been held each year in three separate locations. While the first and last have varied somewhat over time, the middle one has pretty much always been Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. **[They've since left Marymount, and now the "D.C." phase of the tournament is at a hotel northern Virginia.]** I'd done this trip before on several occasions, though it would be new and different for the students I was taking this year. I tried to vary things a bit from the past to keep things fresh for me as well.

For the most part I enjoyed traveling with the group we had this year. This was a smaller group than we've sometimes had, which was nice. Most of the kids were good friends with one another, which avoided a lot of the cliquishness we've had some years.

Tuesday, June 1

Algona, Iowa to Springfield, Ohio

I was up at 5:15 this morning, well before my typical rising time in summer. After showering and throwing my stuff in my car, I stopped by McDonalds to catch a quick bite of breakfast. I've had a tradition (or perhaps a superstition) of eating "good luck" breakfasts at fast food places for decades, going back to stopping at Hardees before every speech contest I went to in high school. It's convenient that our McDonalds now opens ridiculously early (5am), so I was able to get an Egg McMuffin and still make it out to school before 6:00.

One of the kids was already there when I arrived, and all the others showed up promptly—a good sign for what was to come. This year we'd be taking two school vehicles on our trip. One, a blue 1994 Chevy Suburban, has been a familiar sight on school trips for some time now. While it's a high-mileage vehicle, it's been very well maintained and generally drives quite well. We were also privileged to be the first group to break in the school's newest vehicle, a used (but nearly new) black 2008 Suburban that was loaded with just about any electronic feature you could imagine. Both the kids and the mothers who were accompanying us on this trip loved that vehicle. I can't say I did as much. All those electronics just seemed like invitations for things to go wrong. When driving it, everything seemed very soft, too; it seemed to take time to respond whenever you did something. **[The black suburban is still the main suburban used for school events at Garrigan, and I still don't care much for it. I most recently drove it to district speech contest, and it still felt soft and unresponsive. What's more the digital readout kept flashing silly warnings (like "ROAD MAY BE ICY"—duh, it was February—in the place where the odometer should be found.)** For most of the trip the women (two mothers of team members who served as



Loading up the suburbans

chaperones) drove the new vehicle, while our science teacher (the other male chaperon) and I mostly drove the old one. Just about everyone was happy with that arrangement.

We were scheduled to leave at 6:30am, and we were off shortly before that time. We headed eastward to avoid a major construction project between Humboldt and Fort Dodge. We encountered a bit of road work on Avenue of the Saints, but nothing that slowed us down in any meaningful way. Before long we made our first stop, at the Kwik Star convenience store in Janesville.

The next leg of our trip took us down to Iowa City and then on to the Quad Cities. They're repairing the I-80 bridge between Bettendorf and Moline, so we had to take I-280 instead. The two routes are pretty much equidistant, though there's minimally more traffic on 280, because it goes past the airport and slightly closer to the downtown areas. **[Generally 280 is my preferred route around the Quad Cities. It's prettier in Iowa, and it's more interesting in Illinois.]** At Moline we exited onto I-74 and then almost immediately exited again onto John Deere Road. Our captain is a farm boy whose family exclusively uses those green-colored tractors,

and he was pleased at our choice of stops. We pulled into a Wendy's in Moline for our lunch break.

To save a bit of time, I gassed up the vehicles while the kids were eating. There was a convenience store not far from Wendy's, though it turned out to be more than a bit of a chore to get there. Gas was \$2.79⁹, which turned out to be the most we'd pay on the whole trip. That was still a bargain compared to a couple years ago, when we went to Chicago for nationals and paid over four buck a gallon. **[It's weird to think that when I began this revision gas had plunged to just \$1.39⁹. It's rapidly gone back up, but now in March it's still 90¢ less than what we paid on this trip. It also should be noted that gas is now normally cheaper in Illinois than it is in Iowa. That's because a year ago Iowa raised its gas tax by ten cents a gallon.]**

Most of the kids had gotten enormous lunches **[which I've learned is typical of teenagers]**, so even though it took a while to buy gas for two different vehicles, they were still eating when I got back to Wendy's. I had chili and a frosty, and I finished eating my lunch before some of them were done with their meals.

I'd expected we might encounter lots of construction on this trip. A lot of the government stimulus funds were designated to road work, and the states we'd be going through on this trip both have good connections in Washington and also have no problem accepting federal funds. Indeed we did see a lot of highway projects. Throughout Illinois long sections of I-74 were coned off, allowing just one lane of traffic to pass in each direction. They didn't really seem to be doing much of anything, but there sure used lots of cones! Fortunately traffic moved right along.

We stopped briefly at a gorgeously landscaped rest area in Farmer City, Illinois. One of the mothers called home from there and found out it was raining heavily in Algona and there were tornado warnings all over the area. **[Her husband was our county sheriff, so she always had detailed information on the weather.]** Our weather had been pleasant all day long—perhaps a bit on the hot side, but partly cloudy with just a little bit of wind. Compared to what we've sometimes encountered in our travels, this was ideal.



**Team members in the blue suburban
Greenfield, Indiana**

There were signs from Peoria onward warning of construction in Indianapolis. They said "EXPECT LONG DELAYS", and since

our arrival would be right at rush hour, we figured we'd probably hit the worst of it. There was indeed construction on the Indy beltway, but it really wasn't anything bad. They'd maintained six lanes all the way around the city (though one of those lanes was essentially the shoulder), and traffic moved along right at 55mph. There were certainly no long delays, and in fact it was one of the easiest times I've had getting through the area.

We stopped in Greenfield, a former small town that's rapidly becoming a suburb east of Indianapolis. I bought gas at a Sunoco station there (\$2.49⁹), and we had dinner at a White Castle restaurant. Almost all the kids had heard of White Castle, and several were eager to try it. **[This was not long after the movie *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* was popular, and that probably had to do with the appeal.]** Most found that the reality of greasy sliders wasn't as good as the mystique. Even those that didn't like it, chalked up White Castle as "an experience", though. I've had kids in the past who did little but whine and complain; I must commend this group on their positive attitude toward just about everything.

Throughout eastern Indiana we kept seeing signs for Tom Raper, who is apparently one of the largest R.V. dealers in the country. His unfortunate last name caught the attention of the kids, who would get on the CB radios in the suburbans and inform each other whenever another of Mr. Raper's billboards came into view and making up stories about just what sort of a perverted character this guy must be. While I'm not sure "Raper" is actually a word (I believe "rapist" would be better), it certainly was entertaining. **[Interestingly, while the company's website is still tomraper.com, they've changed the name of their business to Camping World. Perhaps Mr. Raper has retired, or perhaps they realized that the name didn't always have the best of connotations.]** The interstate in Indiana was also dotted with a number of adult entertainment establishments, which added to the theme **[...and there's nothing like teenaged boys to notice adult establishments].**

I was glad I wasn't driving on the last leg of today's journey. Traffic was heavy as we made our way through eastern Indiana and western Ohio. In Indiana, particularly, trucks were a serious problem. Indiana has a slower truck speed limit (65mph, rather than 70), so cars either have to stay in the left lane or pass semis constantly. At one point [another of our drivers] nearly hit a car in our blind spot when he was trying to get past a truck. Ohio has sensibly removed the dual speed limit. There was still too much traffic, but at least it all moved along at the same speed.

We took Exit 47 in Ohio and made our way north to Springfield. While it's big enough to have an inset map in the atlas, Springfield gets dwarfed by nearby Dayton and Columbus. The suburban industrial area we went through was about as generic as the place's name.

We drove a few miles north and stopped for the night at the Springfield Fairfield Inn. The hotel was about as generic as the city; it could have been a mid-range hotel in suburban anywhere. It was certainly pleasant, but there was nothing about the rooms or public areas that was memorable.

What was memorable—in a very negative way—was the check-in clerk. This young black woman seemed to do everything in slow motion, and most of it she didn't do very well. First, she couldn't seem to understand that I had reservations for four different rooms. I attempted to show her my print-outs of those reservations, but she wasn't interested in seeing those. She then insisted on having the name of someone that was in each of the rooms. There was no real reason given for this, and I could have made up fictitious names for all she cared. For some reason, though, she couldn't list my name under more than one room.

The biggest problem, though, was that I was planning to pay the bill with Marriott gift cards. Marriott (which owns the Fairfield chain) is one of the best deals in the scrip program. By using their cards for this hotel and another we'd stay at later in the trip, the quiz bowl team effectively made a \$100 donation to the school's tuition assistance program. I've used Marriott gift cards on numerous occasions in the past (including last year's trip to nationals). They're among the easiest scrip cards to process—**much** easier than the cards for Choice Hotels, where I stay more often. At Marriott properties, they just scan the card in their credit card reader at check-in. It's processed like a debit card, and it appears as "Visa" on the folio. Apparently the check-in clerk didn't know this, though. She insisted that I present a "real" credit card (which is often required, in case there are incidental expenses), and she scanned the school card in her machine. Apparently, though, she processed it for the full amount of the rooms, rather than just as a holder for incidentals. Once she had done that, she couldn't get the machine to take the gift card (presumably since there was no longer any balance to be paid). Basically she just had her sequence wrong (she should have first slid the gift card, then the credit card), and she needed to go back and correct it. She couldn't seem to figure that out, though. She called the manager, but unfortunately that call went unanswered. I suggested she call the service number on the back of the card, but the clerk didn't seem to want to do that. After nearly twenty minutes, I suggested that perhaps she could just keep the gift card with the folio and process it later. She didn't really want to do that, but finally she did agree.



Website picture of the extremely generic Springfield Fairfield Inn

We got settled in our rooms, and then I called a quick group meeting. Mostly I wanted to get the kids' cell phone numbers in case there was any reason to contact them. It would turn out that I wouldn't call anyone on the trip, but I figured I was better off safe than sorry. I can remember the early trips we made to nationals, when cell phones were new and expensive items. When we went to Dallas in 1995 only my superintendent (Fr. Feierfeil, who was our other chaperon on that trip) had a cell phone, and its bulky electronics were the size of a briefcase. The following year it was big news that **one** of our kids had a cell phone, an expensive item he practically guarded with his life. Today literally every kid and every adult had his own cell phone, some cheap and simple (like mine) and others complicated "smart" machines that were more like small computers than telephones. **[Last winter I finally joined the smartphone age, though still with a prepaid Tracfone model. I do like the ability to do computer-like functions on the phone, but I almost always find those tasks harder to do on a phone than on a "real" computer. I still wonder why kids prefer having their technology so small.]**

After the meeting I went back down to check on the progress with the gift card. Nothing had happened, but the clerk assured me she was working on it. She said she'd call when she'd figured things out. The kids swam in the hotel pool, and I made a few notes for this journal. Then, I settled into bed fairly early. I tossed and turned for nearly an hour and had just nodded off to sleep when the phone rang. Checking the alarm clock, I noted that it was 11:45pm. That was the time the desk clerk chose to call me about the gift card. She gave me the option of going down to the desk then or waiting until morning to resolve things. Since I was wide awake again, I figured it was better to get things taken care of now.

The clerk who checked me in apparently hadn't figured anything out herself at all. What she'd done instead was wait for the shift to change. She called me down there when the overnight woman arrived for work. That woman seemed quite a bit more competent than the evening clerk. She slid the gift card and showed me a print-out that said it had been charged. I thanked her and made my way back up to the room. Again I tossed and turned, and it was close to 1:00 before I was finally asleep.

Wednesday, June 2 **Springfield, Ohio to Arlington, Virginia**

Like many hotels, the Fairfield Inn had an express check-out system. Folios were placed on the door handles, and if they were correct, you could just leave without formally checking out. Unfortunately, my folio wasn't right. It still showed the school credit card, rather than the gift card as having been charged for the room. While the kids were eating breakfast I tried to straighten things out at the desk. The same clerk who had processed things at midnight seemed confused about the folio (though I'd bet she was the one who printed it out), but she punched some keys and slid the gift card again. When she was done she presented me with a folio she said was correct, though I personally had my doubts. It looked to me as if things had actually been double-billed—both to the gift card and the credit card. I called the inquiry number to confirm the gift card had been processed, and the balance they gave was correct. There was no way I could check on the status of the credit card, but the clerk assured me the charges on it had been credited back. I didn't want to spend all morning arguing, so I took her word for that.

Suffice to say this clerk was just about as incompetent as the first one. I'd finally get things settled (I think) three weeks later, and it was almost by accident that I did. Marriott e-mailed me shortly after this trip requesting that I complete a survey about my experience at the Fairfield Inn, and I filled it out with mostly negative responses. That apparently set off an alarm, because I got a call from the hotel manager. She was both very apologetic and very helpful. She checked and found out that indeed the school credit card was still what appeared on the folio for my rooms. Somehow the gift card had been charged, but then re-credited. The manager issued an immediate credit on the school card, and she also "comped" one of the rooms for our trouble—charging the gift card for only three rather than four rooms. She faxed the paperwork that showed what she did to the school and also mailed the originals of those documents, so hopefully everything is actually correct now. It was certainly a headache. **[Marriott also gave me some ridiculous number of free frequent traveler points for my trouble. I know I got at least three free nights later in the summer, thanks to this snafu.]** I must point out, though, that this particular Fairfield Inn is the only Marriott property where I've ever had a problem using their gift cards. **[I would have a different problem with Marriott cards later, which made me decide to avoid using them in the future.]**

We left the hotel at 7:30. That got us to Columbus right at rush hour, but things flowed surprisingly well through there. We took the southern leg of the Columbus beltway (which is slightly shorter), while most of the traffic seemed to head to the north. There were only a couple congestion points, and we mostly were driving about 60mph all through there.

We repeatedly saw something interesting as we made our way through eastern Ohio. There are truck stops at almost every exit, and they all have digital signs that show the prices for different types of fuel. At three different stations those prices changed right at the time we were driving by. Mostly it was diesel that was changing price, with prices for the truckers either just below or just above \$3 a gallon. Strangely, they don't seem to be able to just switch directly to the new price. Instead they have to flip each digit through a series of numbers like setting the time on a digital clock. It was fascinating to see.

Columbus is right at the dividing line between the plains and the mountains. Indiana is almost totally flat, and western Ohio just has a few gentle hills. Eastern Ohio, though, is really very rugged. While the Appalachians are old, well-worn mountains, they are mountains nonetheless. Fortunately they've done a lot of work on I-70 since the last time I was through here. They have creeper lanes on almost every upgrade, which means you don't really notice all the trucks. They've also smoothed out some of the curves. That meant we had lovely views without difficult driving.

We stopped at a rest area near Old Washington, Ohio, and then continued on to the West Virginia border. Our plan had been to take I-470 to avoid the old industrial city of Wheeling, but signs warned of construction on that route. Instead we stayed on I-70, an ancient interstate that tunnels under a mountain, makes tight curves, and has almost constant exits and entrances. **[Actually 470 isn't a whole lot better.]** Fortunately traffic was light, and it was actually kind of a fun route to drive. Wheeling itself lasted for about seven miles, and west of there the speed limit rose from 50 to 70mph. That limit lasted for about five more miles, lowering to 65 when we hit the Pennsylvania border.

We drove east for about twenty more miles to Washington, Pennsylvania (just south of Pittsburgh), where we turned south on I-79. From there we headed south about thirty-five miles before re-entering West Virginia. **[One of things I like best about heading out to Washington is going through so many states in rapid succession.]** We continued just a few miles further south before stopping for an early lunch at Morgantown.

The kids had suggested Arby's would be a good place for lunch, so that's where I stopped. Again I went and gassed up the suburbans while they were having lunch. Today that was rather a chore. Morgantown is nestled in the heart of the mountains (the WVU sports teams that play there are, after all, called the Mountaineers), and the strip we had stopped on was no exception. The Arby's lot was not in any way level, and it was far below the main drag, U.S. 19. The highway is just two lanes wide, and it is totally packed with traffic. I needed to go left to find gas stations, but it was absolutely impossible to make a left turn. Eventually I turned right (having to really gun the engine just to get up to the highway), drove south about a mile, turned around, and headed back north. I then bought gas at a station called BFS. I have no clue what that stands for, but their \$2.56⁹ gas seemed to work just fine. I bought a tiny ham sandwich from the Arby's dollar menu and assumed that would be my lunch. Then one of the mothers asked if I'd like a much more expensive turkey sandwich she had bought. The woman had taken one bite out of the thing and decided she didn't like it, mostly because it came with a spicy brown mustard. I like spicy mustard, and I was pleased to take her up on the offer of a sandwich. The "Market Fresh" sandwiches at Arby's are typically in the \$5 range, so it certainly wouldn't be something you'd want to just throw away.

From Morgantown we headed east on I-68 through eastern West Virginia and the Maryland panhandle. Whenever I've gone there, I've always been amazed at how incredibly mountainous Maryland is. We weren't much more than a hundred miles from Chesapeake Bay, but you certainly wouldn't know that from the rugged land all around us. I-68 has some serious grades, and the blue suburban struggled a bit on them. It was probably good that we were leading and the newer vehicle following, because we might not have been able to keep up otherwise.

Mostly the route I-68 follows is very rural. The exception is the city of Cumberland, another place no one cares about that's big enough to have its own inset map in the atlas. Cumberland is a very dumpy old industrial city. It's on the Potomac, and is probably the uppermost point of navigation on that river. The city lies in a very narrow valley, surrounded by very rugged mountains. I-68 cuts right straight through Cumberland, snaking through every neighborhood and past every defunct factory. Apparently this "expressway" was built in 1965 as "new" U.S. 40, and it doesn't seem to have been improved any since then. The speed limit is mostly 45 mph through Cumberland, going down as low as 35mph at one point.

Fortunately most of the drive along I-68 was much more pleasant. Most of the western Maryland is really quite remote. Driving through it, it's hard to believe you're just a couple hours from several of the largest cities in America. Traffic is relatively light, and it mostly moves along right at the designated 65mph speed limit. I personally like 65 better than the 70mph limit we have in Iowa. It just seems a more relaxing speed to drive, and the difference isn't enough to make the time significantly longer. All along the road in the Maryland panhandle there are big brown signs saying "MARYLAND WILDLIFE – WATCH FOR IT! STAY ALERT". The signs feature stylized silhouettes of a deer and a bear, both of which are probably quite common in these mountains. Fortunately, no animals came out of the woods and attacked us. The only Maryland wildlife we saw was on those signs.

We stopped at a rest area just west of Hancock, Maryland. There happened to be a car from Iowa parked at that rest area, and interestingly the other adults on the trip actually knew the people. I guess it really is a small world. I had chosen to take a different route into Washington than we'd done in the past. Other times we'd continued east on I-70 and then come down through Frederick and Rockville. Our schedule would mean that today we'd be arriving on the Capital Beltway right at rush hour. I've done that before, and it's not an experience I cared to repeat. **[Honestly, my preference is to avoid the Capital Beltway at all hours; it's one of the worst highways in the country.]** I opted instead to cut back into West Virginia (at the extreme eastern edge of that state's eastern panhandle). We took I-81 down from Hagerstown, Maryland through Martinsburg, West Virginia, and on to Winchester, Virginia. South of there we picked up I-66, which leads straight into Washington. If you look at a map, you will see that this is rather a "Z" shaped route. It was definitely the right choice, though. While I-81 carried annoyingly much traffic (it's the way truckers avoid the even more heavily traveled I-95 further east), it all moved right along. We joined I-66 about 60 miles west of Washington, and for more than half that distance there was practically no traffic at all (very similar to what we'd been through in western Maryland). We passed numerous Civil War historic sites (most notable Manassas or Bull Run), and it might be fascinating at some point to come back here and actually see them rather than just driving past. Manassas marks the start of metro Washington, and traffic picked up there. Through most of the suburbs, though, I-66 is eight lanes wide. Heading toward the city, that was more than enough to accommodate the load at evening rush. The same was not true in the opposite direction, though. The westbound lanes were clogged, with traffic at a



Maryland wildlife sign

total standstill for more than a mile. I was **very** glad we were headed the direction we were.

The only real congestion we saw on eastbound I-66 was inside the beltway. Arlington County has repeatedly rejected attempts to widen I-66, so it remains just four lanes through one of the most densely populated areas in the country. Our exit was right at the point where the highway narrowed from four to two lanes in each direction, and just past a major interchange with the highway that leads to Dulles Airport. That created some problems, but far fewer than we'd have likely had if we'd come from the north and taken the beltway around the city.



Econolodge—Metro with condo building behind, Arlington, Virginia

We arrived at our destination, the Econolodge—Metro, right at 4:30. I'd stayed at this hotel the last time I brought kids to Washington. It's easy to get to from the freeway and also within walking distance of the D.C. metro trains. In addition it's about the cheapest place anywhere remotely close to central Washington. (Not that over a hundred bucks a night is cheap, mind you, but most other places are more like \$200.) It's definitely not a nice hotel, but there's nothing at all wrong with it. I would bet the Econolodge was built in the '70s, and at the time it probably attracted attention of passing traffic on Lee Highway, the main drag in Arlington. Today the motel is dwarfed by a sea of condo buildings that surround it. They were just starting to build these when we were here in 2004. They're part of the "transit-oriented development" plan for the area surrounding the East Falls Church metro station. Apparently lots of people will pay a quarter million dollars for an apartment within walking distance of the train station, so they've choked the neighborhood with such apartments. The exact same thing is happening near all the light rail stations in Minneapolis and Los Angeles, and near many of the 'L' stations in Chicago. Both here and elsewhere they look like rather nice apartment buildings. I'm just amazed people pay so much for them. **[Those condos are likely half a million each these days, and rents for similar apartments would be \$2500 or so a month. It's just insane what housing goes for in big cities.]**

Though parking is at a premium at the Econolodge, we did manage to find space for both our vehicles. Unlike last night, check-in here was extremely efficient. The desk clerk didn't really speak English (in fact, I'm not sure what language she did speak), but she already had the keys ready and processed everything in no time.

The Econolodge is built into a hill. Two stories are above ground level both front and back, while a semi-basement (which is where we were) has guest rooms only on one side of the building, with a laundry, a vending room, and other service areas on the side facing the hill. It's smart to put a group of kids in that area, because they're unlikely to disturb other guests in that location. The rooms were small, but serviceable, and no one had any serious complaints.

As he had done the last time we were in Washington, my superintendent Gene Meister came out to watch the team play. This was especially meaningful to the kids this year. About a year and a half ago Gene was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a serious cancer of the blood. **[Gene's initial prognosis was not good, but he'd gotten very aggressive treatments and had steadily improved since the initial diagnosis. Even so, he'd waited until the last minute to buy tickets and had made sure they were easily cancellable. He'd also brought along a full suitcase loaded with various chemotherapy drugs.]** Gene was able to get around well and seemed to really enjoy himself. It definitely impressed the kids that Gene made the trip out to see them compete, and I know some of them felt they owed it to him to do the best they could. **[When I visited Gene in the hospital the day before he died, one of the things we talked about was this trip, which he clearly remembered positively.]**

Gene flew out to Washington together with his wife MaryAnn and their grandson Andrew. The grandson just finished fifth grade (which is kind of scary, since it doesn't seem that long ago I taught his father in high school), and they felt (correctly) he was the perfect age to enjoy the sights of Washington. I think they were surprised he enjoyed the quiz bowl competition as much as he did. He got into the games like a sports fan, and I wonder if I may not see him on the team a few years from now. **[Andrew apparently did quiz bowl**

in junior high, but in high school he's only occasionally competed at our home tournament on the "jock" team. He's brought up the trip to Washington several times over the years, and it was obviously a fun time for him.]

Meisters had also reserved a room at the Econolodge. They had arrived at National Airport about an hour and a half before we got to Washington. They took the metro from there, checked in at the hotel, and were settled in when we arrived. I had a nice visit with them and was pleased to find that all their flights and connections all went fine.

Such was not the case with the last part of our delegation. Our captain's parents had also made arrangements to come out to Washington. The best deal they could find was on Air-Tran. They were to fly out of Des Moines early in the morning, make a connection in Milwaukee, and then continue onto Washington. Unfortunately their flight out of Des Moines was apparently cancelled due to a lack of aircraft (which might have had something to do with the severe weather we'd heard about yesterday). They were able to be re-booked on an afternoon flight, but ended up spending about eight hours at DSM, one of the dullest airports in the country. They then had an extremely tight connection in Milwaukee (half an hour, I think), and they were told there was a good chance their luggage (which they'd paid additional money to check) might not make it onto their flight to Washington. Fortunately it did, but they apparently had a very rough flight and circled repeatedly before finally landing at DCA. They had originally planned to take a cab from the airport to the hotel, but they changed their plans and instead opted like the Meisters to take the metro. They phoned their son when they left the airport, and I agreed to meet them at East Falls Church station and escort them to the Econolodge.

Meeting them also gave me the chance to check on another potential problem. I'd bought day passes for the metro ahead of time from the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority website. WMATA only allows you to make \$200 worth of transactions during a certain time period (a month, I think), so I had to buy the passes on two separate occasions. It just happened that between the time I'd bought the first set of passes and the second, they'd raised the price of the day passes slightly. I forget the actual amounts, but the first were just under \$8 and the second just over. What I wanted to make sure of was that the old passes would still work, even though they'd raised the fare since they were purchased.

The station manager at East Falls Church agreed that the fare had recently gone up, but she had no clue whether the old passes would work or not. She was also not terribly helpful, which I'd find was true of most of the WMATA employees. She suggested I look in a brochure for the customer service and assured me that if I called it, they'd be open and able to help me. I got out my cell phone and did call, but the call went straight to voice mail. When I pointed that out to the station manager, she acted annoyed. She did eventually look up a different number, which she wrote down on a scrap of paper for me. When I called that one I just got a recording. It wouldn't even allow me to leave a message. Her only suggestion was that I continue to call that number. "They don't close until seven," she said. "Someone will take your call." No one did.

[Some people rave about the D.C. metro, but it's just about my least favorite transit system. A large part of the problem is the fare structure and customer service. They've since done away with the magnetic stripe paper farecards on which these passes were printed. Their replacement, hard plastic SmarTrip touch cards, aren't much better, though. When we went to Washington last summer, almost every aspect of SmarTrip—buying them, using them, and re-loading them—was needlessly complex and awkward. Chicago and Minneapolis use cards similar to SmarTrip, but the transit systems in both those cities are MUCH more user-friendly than D.C.]

Eventually I just tried one of the lower-priced passes in the turnstile (which was not really that big of a deal, since we were planning on using them later tonight anyway). It let me in and then back out again, so that convinced me it would work without a problem. We had other issues (the cardboard tickets with magnetic strips they use for fare media in Washington have never worked well, and they're getting more and more obsolete), but at least the passes were valid. **[It's interesting that the SmarTrip cards don't seem to be much more reliable than the magnetic media they replaced. Chicago's Ventra cards sometimes are slow to register on buses, but they always work in the train station turnstiles. For some reason the D.C. turnstiles seem overly touchy, though. They never seem to register properly.]**

Before long our captain's parents arrived. They were obviously annoyed from all the flight problems, but in good spirits otherwise. I walked them back from the station to the hotel, and they soon checked in and got settled into their room.

About 6:30 we all headed out as a group. We cut through the entryway to a condo building to get to a bike path that leads to the metro station. I'd bet people do this all the time, though I'm not certain of the strict legality of it. Past the condos the bike path has a high wall to its north side, keeping people from falling down to onto I-66 below. A fence separates the bike path from its neighbors to the south, which are mostly the back yards of single family homes from the mid-20th Century. They're pleasant homes (though nothing spectacular), but at \$500,000 and up they're **way** beyond my price range. **[I've seen homes in this area on HGTV in recent years, and most of them have been priced at over a million dollars—and this is considered an "affordable" area or metro Washington.]**

It's the equivalent of about three blocks from the hotel to the metro station. At the metro entrance you can either loop a long way around on city streets or go down a steep flight of stairs that leads directly to the station building. The station itself is beneath I-66, which is elevated for an interchange at this point. After going through the turnstiles, we took an escalator up and arrived right on a platform right in the median of the freeway. The idea is the same as many of the 'L' stations in Chicago, but it's kind of strange to enter from below rather than above.

I hadn't eaten since Arby's in Morgantown. Most of the kids had been snacking right along, but a couple of them were also getting hungry. To take care of that, I made our first stop Rosslyn station, since I knew there were several restaurants just outside the entrance. I also chose Rosslyn because in the past I've had kids who were impressed by the extremely long escalator there. Several were, but unfortunately one of our girls apparently doesn't care for escalators at all, and an extra-long one was definitely not a treat for her. I'm not sure if she's scared of them or if she gets sick or what, but she definitely didn't like the thing. Escalator-phobia is definitely

not a good thing in Washington, because it's hard to get anywhere without using escalators. Many of the metro stations are extremely deep, so long escalators like the one at Rosslyn are very common here.

We divided into different groups for dinner. The bulk of us went to a multi-story McDonalds. Some others went to a nearby Subway and Burger King, while yet another group went to Cosi, a sandwich shop with pretensions that's a lot like Panera. I enjoyed my McDonalds Southwest salad and was pleased to find that the prices in Arlington were almost the same as they are at home right now. Nothing is cheap at McDonalds these days, but at least it wasn't even more costly here.

Once everyone had finished supper, we re-assembled in a little courtyard outside the metro station. Because of the girl who didn't want to use the escalator, we instead opted for the handicapped entrance, which has an elevator that leads straight from the street to the platform. That ended up being a bit awkward with a group, because at the bottom we all had to scan our passes in a single turnstile, one at a time. We made it through, though, and before long we caught another train.



Garrigan quiz bowl team posing with the U.S. Capitol behind them

We crossed under the Potomac and continued on to Smithsonian station, which is right in the middle of the National Mall in downtown Washington. There are several good places for photos right outside the subway station, and we got team pictures with the Capitol and the Washington Monument in the background.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that National Mall (and pretty much all of Washington) had a much more relaxed feeling than it did when we were last here, back in 2004. I'm not sure if that's due to the change in administration or if it's just that enough more time has passed since the 2001 attacks, but I really did get the feeling things were

getting back to normal. When we were here before they had ugly concrete barriers surrounding all the big monuments and police tape that kept you off the grass on the mall itself. Tonight people were playing softball and soccer on the mall. We could move around freely wherever we wanted to and get right up close to the monuments without any special security precautions. It was nice to see the place looking like a park rather than an armed camp.

We made our way over to the World War II Memorial. This was brand new when we were here in 2004, and it still seems a bit out of place on the mall. It's a nice monument, though, and a fitting tribute to the war. We then walked along the reflecting pool that separates the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. That was a mistake. The water had obviously been left "natural" rather than being cleaned; it stank and it attracted swarms of gnats. A flock of ducks seemed to like the water, but it wasn't very pleasant for humans.

When we got to the Lincoln Memorial we decided on a time and place to meet up and then divided up to explore the area. That was something I liked about this group. Unlike some recent groups, they were willing to divide into smaller groups, rather than insisting on doing everything together. I'd seen everything here before, but it was all new to our science teacher. He was particularly glad to see the Korean War Memorial, since his father is a veteran of that war. **[For the same reason, the World War II Memorial holds the most sentimental value for me.]** We also saw the Vietnam Wall, though by the time we got there it was too dark to make out the individual names on it.

Finally we made our way up to the Lincoln Memorial itself. A sign at the entrance to the Lincoln Memorial says "QUIET – RESPECT PLEASE". It's too bad that pretty much no one paid any attention to it. The roof of the monument tends to magnify sound, and with thousands of discourteous people in there, it was just deafening. We did see the place, though, and we snapped a few obligatory pictures. Then we made our way back down to the plaza.

Many of those who were inside the Lincoln Memorial were students on school trips. All over Washington we'd see middle school and high school kids all clad in identical T-shirts and being herded on and off charter buses from one attraction to the next. Many of our kids were on a similar trip that our band and choir made to New York a couple years ago, and there are endless pictures of them all wearing identical yellow jackets (more appropriate for winter weather than the T-shirts). We didn't see yellow, but we did see two different shades of blue, plus orange, green, white, and black. Tonight most of these groups were following guides around, and the guides invariably were holding up umbrellas—not for protection from the elements, but so they could be more easily identified. As it got darker, many of them would put something on the umbrella to light it up. **[It's always been helpful when we travel that I'm tall and I generally also wear a distinctive baseball cap. That stands out without being quite so obvious as an umbrella.]**



LEFT: Quiet sign at the Lincoln Memorial

RIGHT: People playing softball on National Mall (Is it a ground rule double if you hit the Washington Monument?)

The bulk of the kids in these groups seemed only minimally interested in what they were seeing. That's too bad, because there's really quite a lot of fascinating stuff in Washington. Nothing is all that interesting when you're just herded from here to there, though. I sometimes wonder what the point of big trips like this is—other than to make money for the tour operators. **[Just yesterday I got an e-mail from a tour operator who said she'd heard I take kids on trips and wanted to assist me. While the groups I take would be far too small to be profitable to such a company, I don't know that I'd want to use such an operator even if they would accept a small group. I like doing the planning, and it does provide a much more personalized experience for the kids.]**

While our group was much smaller than any of these, there were still a number of people in our delegation. We re-assembled and began to make our way back to Smithsonian station. That was easier said than done, though. The Washington metro stations are poorly marked by day (a brown pillar is their chief indicator) and almost impossible to locate after dark. We ended up walking well past the station and having to turn around and head back to it. **[There really is no excuse for how badly the Washington metro stations are marked. I don't think I've been to any other city in the world where it's so difficult to locate transit stations.]** When we got there we discovered that for some reason the mall entrance to the station closes at 10pm. It was just a couple minutes after 10:00 when we got there. Had we not back-tracked, we'd have gotten there before they'd closed. As it was, though, we had to find an alternate entrance. **[This is probably a crime-prevention measure, though in the age of camera surveillance I'd think they could keep all their entrances open whenever the trains are running.]** Fortunately it was just a short walk to the "main" entrance (though I'd bet by day the mall actually handles more traffic). A couple of the kids had problems getting their passes to work, but we made our way through (essentially having them jump the turnstiles—going through together with other people **[which is surprisingly easy to do in D.C.]**) and down to the platforms.

We had a long wait for a train, and it was around 11pm by the time we got back to East Falls Church. When we made our way up to the bike path, we were surprised to find it was unlit. There are street lights all along the path, but none of them was actually on. Power seemed to be on throughout the neighborhood, though, so I don't know what was up. Maybe the local residents complained that there was too much light in their back yards, or perhaps it was a city budget cut. At any rate, we made our way down a very dark path back to the hotel.

Thursday, June 3

Arlington, Virginia & Washington, D.C.

I was up around 7:00 this morning and showered fairly quickly. Then I made my way up to the cramped lobby where the Econolodge had a small table set up as a breakfast buffet. This table seemed to be ever varying, and it was luck of the draw what was available at any given time. At one time or another they'd have just about anything you could imagine on a breakfast buffet: cold cereal, oatmeal, pastries, toast, frozen waffles, bagels, yogurt, fresh fruit, fruit cocktail—and probably lots more stuff I'm not remembering. **[Notably absent, though, were eggs and breakfast meats.]** At any given time, though, there would be just two or three different things. When one item ran out, they'd replace it with another. Partly because of this some people liked the Econolodge breakfast quite a lot,

while others didn't. I think it depended on just which version of it each person sampled. **[This was actually one of the better Econolodge breakfasts I've had, but the chain as a whole is definitely to the bottom of the hotel breakfast ladder.]**

Regardless of what we had, pretty much everyone in our party filled a plate at the table upstairs and then went down to a lower lobby area at the end of the hallway where our rooms were. This filled space that couldn't be used for rooms, because it had no windows. It was, however, brightly lit, and two full walls of mirrors made the place seem larger than it was. Vending machines were at one end of the room, and a desk with a public computer was on another wall. The rest of the walls were lined with rather formal living room furniture. It was a rather pleasant room, except for having one of the ugliest carpets I've ever seen—a busy pattern of red and yellow interlocking circles. I'm sure it hid dirt well, but it really was hideous to look at.

One girl in our group wanted to see the Holocaust Museum, so she and her mother left early to be sure to get tickets. The rest of us set off at 8:45. My plan was to arrive at the train station promptly at 9:00, when I thought the day passes would start working. While I'd like to blame WMATA, unfortunately it was my mistake that I hadn't read the details correctly. I knew the day passes weren't valid until after rush hour, but in fact that time was 9:30 rather than the 9:00 time I had in mind. Rather than have us stand around the station for half an hour, I used most of my available cash to buy individual tickets for everyone in the group to head to our first destination of the day, Arlington Cemetery. I checked the chart on the vending machines, which said the rush hour fare for that journey was \$2.30. I put forty bucks in the machine and got fourteen tickets and a bunch of golden dollars back.

The trip to Arlington Cemetery was uneventful, but we had a surprise when we arrived. The first kid in line put his ticket in the turnstile. Normally with a one-way ticket, the turnstile would eat the ticket and open the turnstile. This time, though, the machine didn't budge. The kid assumed he had put the ticket in a bad turnstile and tried another, but it still didn't work. I happened to notice that the digital readout said "ADD FARE", and I stopped all the rest of the group before they proceeded. Because D.C. metro fares are based on both distance and time, you have to scan your ticket both to enter and to leave. If the amount on a fare card is insufficient to exit, you need to add fare at a vending machine on the secure side of the station before you can leave. I scanned my card at the vending machine, and it directed me to add 10¢. Though puzzled, I handed out a bunch of nickels and dimes to everyone and instructed them to also add that amount to their tickets. Once we did, everyone had enough money to leave the station.

On the way out I asked the station attendant just why it was that the sign by the vending machine told me the fare was \$2.30, when in fact it cost \$2.40 to make this trip. I had checked the sign twice, I told him, and I would have gladly bought tickets for the correct fare if the sign had told me it. The man rather rudely told me that this was my fault; I should have known that there was a 10¢ supplement to all fares paid at rush hour (apparently part of the same fare increase that changed the prices on the day passes). When I asked how I was supposed to know that, when the "rush hour" fare shown on the sign said \$2.30, the man pointed out that in the corner of the fare signs was a tiny sticker that notified people of this increase. He was really quite rude and implied that it was my fault that I hadn't noticed the sticker.

Frankly this strikes me as false advertising. It's probably legal (similar to airlines that advertise a cheap fare, but then add any number of mandatory fees and surcharges), but it's unethical. If they want to increase their fares, they should clearly disclose what those new fares are, instead of assuming a little sticker will get them off the hook. I understand that they need to cover those costs that aren't subsidized, but they should be honest about what they charge. (... They should also train their station attendants in polite customer service, but that's a completely different issue.)

FARES FROM THIS STATION
To enter and exit the Metrorail system each customer must have a SmarTrip® card, farecard or pass

ONE-WAY SmarTrip CARD FARES When purchasing a paper farecard you must add \$1 to fare for each trip

FARE PERIODS
Monday-Thursday
150 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. Peak
3:30 a.m. - 7:00 a.m. Peak
7:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Peak
7:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m. Off-Peak
Friday
150 a.m. - 4:30 a.m. Peak
4:30 a.m. - 7:00 a.m. Off-Peak
7:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Off-Peak
Monday - 10:00 a.m. Peak
Saturday
150 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Off-Peak
Sunday
7:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m. Peak
7:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m. Off-Peak
Federal Holidays Off-Peak

FARES
Each customer must have their own SmarTrip® card, farecard or rail pass to enter and exit the Metrorail system.
Paper farecards and passes can be purchased at Farecards and Passes vending machines.
SmarTrip® cards can be purchased at Metrorail stations, online at www.mta.com. Metro sales offices, regional transit stores and select retailers.
Children
Up to two children age 4 and younger ride free with a paying customer.
Seniors/People With Disabilities
Senior Fare Discounts
Seniors age 65 and over, and people with disabilities, who have a Metro ID or Medicare card and a photo ID pay half of the peak fare when using a senior/disabled farecard or senior/disabled SmarTrip® card.
These cards are not available in stations. See station manager for details.
PARKING AT METRO
During weekdays, Metro daily parking facilities accept payment by a SmarTrip® card and major credit cards.
Related spaces at Metro parking lots accept coins only.
During weekdays and federal holidays, parking at Metro parking facilities is free, including reserved spaces.

DESTINATION	LINE	TRAVEL TIME	PEAK	OFF-PEAK	DESTINATION	LINE	TRAVEL TIME	PEAK	OFF-PEAK
Addison Road	●	37	3.05	2.75	Landow	●	38	4.00	2.75
Anacostia	●	24	3.05	2.65	Largo Town Center	●	43	4.65	3.50
Archives	●	15	2.30	1.85	L'Enfant Plaza	●	18	2.45	1.95
Arlington Cemetery	●	31	3.15	2.05	McPherson Sq.	●	15	2.30	1.65
Balton	●	29	3.70	2.75	Medical Center	●	18	4.10	2.75
Banning Road	●	31	3.35	2.55	Metro Center	●	9	2.25	1.60
Bethesda	●	26	3.25	2.75	Minnesota Ave.	●	31	3.15	2.05
Braddock Road	●	22	4.20	3.95	Morgan Boulevard	●	40	4.35	3.40
Branch Ave	●	37	3.20	2.45	MI Vernon Sq.	●	16	2.20	1.75
Brookland-CUA	●	0	2.45	1.70	Navy Yard-Ballpark	●	22	2.75	2.05
Capital Heights	●	24	3.20	2.75	Naylor Road	●	41	4.35	3.40
Capitol South	●	23	3.20	2.65	New Carrollton	●	4	2.10	1.70
Cherryville	●	35	3.60	2.75	Norma-Gallaudet U	●	22	3.10	2.05
Cleverdon	●	25	3.40	2.70	Pentagon	●	27	2.75	2.05
Cleveland Park	●	17	2.80	2.05	Pentagon City	●	23	3.25	2.05
College Park U of Md	●	15	2.95	2.05	Potomac Ave	●	12	2.35	1.90
Columbia Heights	●	12	2.10	1.70	Prince George's Plaza	●	3	2.10	1.70
Congress Heights	●	27	3.40	2.70	Rhode Island Ave	●	39	3.75	2.50
Court House	●	23	3.25	2.05	Rockville	●	27	3.45	2.70
Crystal City	●	25	3.35	2.65	Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport	●	21	2.95	2.05
Deanwood	●	33	3.30	2.05	Rosslyn	●	43	3.75	3.50
Dunn Loring	●	41	3.45	3.30	Shady Grove	●	16	2.20	1.60
East Falls Church	●	13	2.45	1.95	Shaw-Howard U	●	9	2.60	2.05
Eastern Market	●	34	4.30	3.35	Silver Spring	●	17	2.45	1.95
Eastman Square	●	25	2.65	2.05	Smithsonian	●	29	3.60	2.75
Eisenhower Ave	●	36	4.60	3.50	Southern Ave	●	34	4.05	2.75
Farragut North	●	11	2.40	1.95	Stadium-Armory	●	28	2.85	2.05
Farragut West	●	16	2.45	1.95	Sully	●	34	4.05	2.75
Federal Center SW	●	21	2.60	2.00	Takoma	●	6	2.20	1.75
Federal Triangle	●	15	2.35	1.90	Tenleytown-AU	●	21	3.25	2.00
Foggy Bottom-GWU	●	18	2.60	2.05	Twinbrook	●	36	3.35	2.50
Forest Glen	●	12	3.15	2.05	U Street	●	14	2.25	1.80
Fort Totten	●	3	2.10	1.70	Union Station	●	46	5.20	3.50
Friendship Heights	●	59	3.75	3.50	Van Dorn Station	●	19	2.95	2.05
Friendship Heights	●	23	3.45	2.70	Vienna	●	43	3.75	3.50
Gallery Place	●	8	2.20	1.75	Virginia Sq-GMU	●	27	3.55	2.75
Georgetown	●	9	2.10	1.70	Waterfront	●	20	2.85	2.05
Georgia Ave-Petworth	●	19	4.05	2.75	West Falls Church	●	37	4.60	3.50
Greenbelt	●	18	3.60	2.75	West Hyslopville	●	9	2.10	1.70
Government-Straathmore	●	21	4.65	3.50	Wheaton	●	18	3.60	2.75
Huntington	●	37	4.75	3.50	White Flint	●	32	3.05	3.50
Judiciary Sq	●	7	2.10	1.70	Woodley Park	●	15	2.65	2.05
King St-Old Town	●	34	4.45	3.45					

For more information ask a Station Manager or visit www.mta.com

[This is just one more of the numerous reasons I dislike the Washington metro. When it's easier to do your taxes than to pay the correct subway fare, there's a problem—and when people whose job is customer service pretend it's the customer's fault that they missed a tiny message on a 2 x 3 foot sign, there's a serious problem. Unfortunately WMATA is stuck with its absurdly complex fare structure because of its unique location that requires separate subsidies from two different states and the federal government. However they could easily program the vending machines so that when you buy a one-way ticket it asks what station you are traveling to and then automatically charges the correct fare for that station and the time of day when the ticket was bought. The vending machines for Seattle's light rail (which also uses zone-based fares) work like this, as do most commuter rail ticket machines. There's no reason the D.C. metro couldn't do something similar. ... By

Typical fare chart by a vending machine. (This website picture is more recent than our trip, since it refers to SmartTrip cards rather than farecards. The fare structure remains needlessly complex, though.)

the way, I wonder how many tourists were confused by the sign I borrowed a picture of when updating this travelogue. If you look VERY carefully, you'll notice it mentions a \$1 supplement on all fares paid with paper farecards. The message is in small print to the right of the "ONE WAY SmarTrip CARD FARES" line above the table of fares by station. It's actually larger than the rush hour supplement sticker that was on the signs when we took this trip, but I'm sure LOTS of people miss it. If passengers did actually spend the time to read these signs in detail, there would be huge back-ups at the vending machines.]

The Arlington Cemetery station is weird. The platforms are elevated, the lobby area is underground, and the entrance is at ground level. That meant we had to go down and then back up a series of escalators to finally exit the station. I have no idea why they didn't just build the station house below the tracks, but they didn't. [This is one of the strangest set-ups for a transit station I've seen anywhere.]

Once we paid our ransom and exited the station, getting to the cemetery itself was easy. The visitors center is about a block down and across the street from the metro station. It's one of the few things in the Washington area that actually is convenient to a metro station.



ABOVE: On the "Tourmobile" bus
BELOW: Kennedy gravesite – Arlington National Cemetery



from the visitors center. [This is another problem with the Tourmobile. It really doesn't go all that close to any of the points of interest in the cemetery.] Once we got there the Kennedy grave is really quite moving. A very simple brass marker indicates where President Kennedy lies, with an identical marker next to it for Jackie. An eternal flame burns behind their two markers. Their son who died in infancy and their stillborn daughter are also buried in the complex, and there is an additional space where Caroline Kennedy will be interred. (I had to check out of curiosity, and John Kennedy, Jr.'s ashes were scattered at sea.) A wall surrounding the walkway by

The visitors center may be close, but Arlington Cemetery as a whole is immense. Mr. Meister splurged and bought "tourmobile" tickets for the group as his treat. This was not a small gift; most of the tickets were \$7.50 each, though the Meisters themselves got a senior discount, and their grandson was considered a "child". We thanked him and joined a long line of T-shirt clad school groups waiting in the heat and humidity to board the open buses that Tourmobile operates.

The tourmobile tickets were good in that they provided a way for Meisters to get up the steep hill to the main attractions at the cemetery. However, if an able-bodied person reading this is considering a visit to Arlington, my advice would be to skip the bus ride. We had a long wait (more than half an hour) before we were even able to board a bus. The ride up the hill was accompanied by a very bored guide essentially reading the National Park Service pamphlet aloud. Theoretically you can hop on and off the Tourmobile buses. They come so infrequently and are packed so full, though, that it really isn't practical to do that. Once we were at the top of the hill, we walked between the attractions and then walked back down to the bottom. While I thank Mr. Meister for his generosity, I personally felt the tickets were a rip-off. [We'd return to Arlington on a later trip, and I can't say my opinion was much better then. They really need to double or triple the number of buses to make it a useful service. There's far too much demand for the available supply as it is.]

The bus let us off vaguely near the Kennedy gravesite. There was actually quite a long uphill walk from the bus stop to get to the site itself, but not nearly so long as it would have been

the graves is engraved with quotations from the President. Robert and Edward Kennedy are buried just down the hill. Their graves are marked by simple white crosses, distinct but in the same theme as the countless soldiers who are buried at Arlington.



Grave of Robert Kennedy

BELOW: "Pickens" students blocking view of changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns



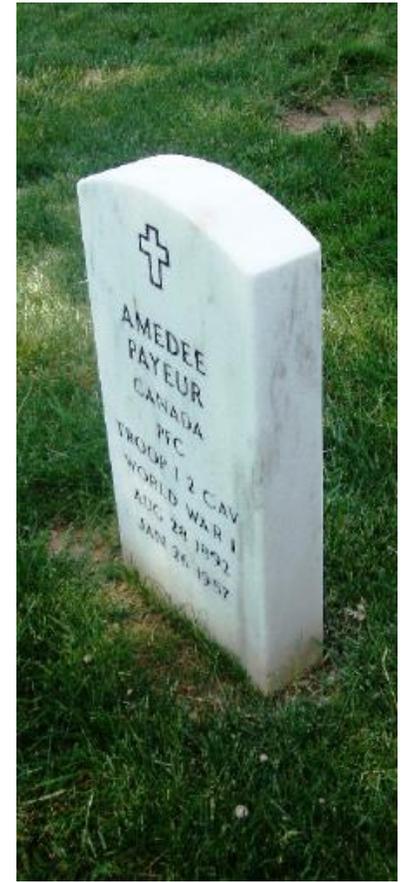
We considered taking the tourmobile to our next stop, but it rapidly became clear it would be quicker and easier to just walk. We went up, down, and up again, but fortunately the area was mostly well shaded. Eventually we made it to the other big attraction at Arlington Cemetery, the Tomb of the Unknowns. When we arrived the place was crawling with high school kids in colored T-shirts, to the point that it was difficult to see anything. It turned out that we'd arrived right at the time of the changing of the guard, and the crowd was gathered to watch the solemn ceremony. While we caught only a glimpse of it, it was still interesting to see. It was, however, better when the throngs of people left and we could actually see the site up close.

The Tomb of the Unknowns (which some call the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and which officially has no name) contains remains of soldiers "known but to God" who died in World War I, World War II, and Korea. The design is quite simple, and it's really a very moving monument. The guard almost detracts from it. He patrols back and forth on a long, narrow mat that is set up in front of the tomb. While he (and I gather they all are **he's**) adds to the somber mood, it is a bit distracting to see him constantly moving his gun around in formal drill patterns. I think it would more dignified to just have a rope around the tomb area, perhaps with guards at the side just keeping watch. The current guard pattern has been continuous since 1937, though, and just maintaining that tradition is fascinating in itself.

It's interesting that the guards do not wear rank insignias on their uniforms. This is supposedly so they will not outrank the soldiers they are guarding, whose rank is obviously not known. Also interesting is that apparently the guards' guns are not loaded. I have no clue what would happen if there were an incident at the tomb. While the crowd we encountered

at the start was perhaps too loud to be considered truly respectful, they were not unruly and certainly not threatening. I'm pleased to say our kids all had very good behavior, both here and elsewhere.

I was also interested to find that there was once a crypt containing remains of an unknown soldier from the Vietnam War. The body was interred in 1984, but it was exhumed just four years later. Advances in DNA technology allowed the body to be identified and returned to his family. The remains of a handful of soldiers who died in Vietnam are still unidentified. Some of these apparently remain in forensic laboratories, while others have been buried in Hawaii. They've decided not to inter another Vietnam unknown, and there are no unidentified remains from our nation's later conflicts. They've replaced the Vietnam plaque with a marker that reads "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen" to account for those who are unknown because they have never been found. I found it odd that they chose to use the word "servicemen" on a plaque created in the '90s, but the basic idea is certainly appropriate.



LEFT: Tomb of the Unknowns – Arlington National Cemetery
RIGHT: Typical marker – Arlington National Cemetery

Again the tourmobile was not a viable option when we had finished at the Tomb of the Unknowns. One stopped, but there wasn't sufficient room to board, and it would be fifteen minutes before another would come by. It took about that long to walk back down the hill to the visitors center.

Our return took us through the main grounds of the cemetery. Arlington looks precisely like the military cemetery it is. Thousands and thousands and thousands of markers line the hillsides. The earliest (dating from the Civil War) were chosen by the families of the deceased and show quite a bit of variety. Since World War II, though, all the dead have been given identical marble markers similar to the one at left. I'd seen these same markers at Vicksburg, and every time I take the light rail train in Minneapolis, I see them in the Ft. Snelling Cemetery just south of the airport. There are dozens of other military cemeteries around the country, with hundreds of thousands of those identical monuments. Arlington isn't even the largest; it's just well known because it's across the river from the nation's capital. **[Actually in number of graves Arlington is the largest national cemetery, though in area Calverton Cemetery on Long Island is larger—and it may one day surpass Arlington in burials. Arlington is also one of the original national cemeteries established during the Civil War, and it is easily the most prestigious of the military cemeteries.]**

I was intrigued in looking through my photos that the close-up I took was the grave of a French Canadian who served in the U.S. cavalry. Whether Monsieur Payeur (whose first name has a feminine spelling, but I'm sure had to be a man in World War I) was an immigrant or a foreign volunteer, I don't know, but for just picking a random grave, it was an interesting choice for a picture.

The cross on this grave is a generic marking indicating that the deceased was Christian (most likely Catholic, particularly as a French Canadian). A lot of Protestant denominations have specific markings unique to their faith. I recognized, for instance, the Methodist cross and flame, and there are a variety of other cross variations unique to various churches. I also saw a number of Stars of David indicating Jewish soldiers, and a few markings I didn't recognize. Apparently there are thirty-one different approved religious markings that can be placed on military graves. We had a quiz bowl question once about the most recently approved of these, which happens to be the Wiccan pentacle. **[That number has now risen to sixty—including a number of Native American symbols and a couple of areligious logos such as a bald eagle and an infinity sign.]** I found it interesting in our increasingly secular age that I didn't see a single grave that didn't have some religious marking. The vast majority bore the generic cross.

Arlington Cemetery was in the news just after our trip there. Apparently there had been some mix-ups, and the remains of several recently-buried soldiers had been placed in the wrong graves. The supervisor issued a formal apology to the affected families, and the markers of the misidentified soldiers are being moved to the correct graves. In a cemetery as large as this, it's amazing there aren't more mistakes.

While it was nearly 90° out, the cemetery is well shaded, and there were drinking fountains along the path at several strategic locations on the way down. We took our time, but we all made it down to the visitors center without any problem. I was especially surprised

at how well Mr. Meister did on the walk. There are a lot of men much younger than him who would have trouble with a long walk in the heat, and they don't have the excuse of recovering from cancer. Gene did really well, both today and throughout the trip. I hope this is a good omen for his prognosis. **[While Gene did pass away shortly after I began writing this revision, he did lead a full life for nearly six years after this trip. He continued coaching baseball, racking up the sixth most wins of any coach in history nationwide, and he was also instrumental in the capital campaign that led to a major addition at our school. He actually seemed quite healthy when we had the dedication for the addition last fall, but he apparently went downhill rapidly starting around Thanksgiving.]**

We cooled off a little at the visitors center and then made our way back to the metro station. A couple in our group had troubles getting their passes to scan. The station attendant (a different person than was working when we arrived) didn't even look at the passes and just had them walk through the handicap gate. That would actually be a problem when we reached our destination, because since the passes hadn't been scanned to enter, the turnstile didn't want to accept them to exit. They just marched on through behind others whose passes did work, though, and no one batted an eye at it. **[Over the years I've seen a lot of people jumping turnstiles in Washington—notably more than in other cities. I think their fare structure and the unending problems with their technology leads otherwise honest people to this minor crime.]**

It would actually be very easy for a group to get around Washington paying only about half the required fare. The turnstiles all have little barriers that come apart for about five seconds to allow people to pass through. At rush hour, they very often just stay open while the next person in line scans their ticket. It's very easy for multiple people to pass through on one cycle of opening, and at rush hour you could probably get a whole family through between two fare-payers. We did pay for everybody (in fact we ended up with more passes than we actually needed); it's just that the tickets didn't always work the way they were supposed to.

We went south just a couple of stops to Pentagon City, a large and very pretentious shopping mall. Except for its four-story design its in-mall subway station it's hard to distinguish the place from Jordan Creek in Des Moines, Coral Ridge in Iowa City, or the Empire in Sioux Falls. We mostly went here just to have lunch. They have an enormous food court, which gave everyone an opportunity to find something they liked. When we were here in 2004 I complained that the food at Pentagon City was extremely overpriced. Happily that was not my reaction this time. Certainly nothing was cheaper now than it was six years ago, but food prices elsewhere have skyrocketed while here they've basically stayed the same. I wouldn't call anything at Pentagon City a bargain, but nothing was more than a quarter or so more than I'd pay at home. My bet is that in 2004 Virginia had a substantially higher minimum wage than Iowa did. Ours went up dramatically a couple years back (it's now double what I earned back in the '70s), and fast food prices followed suit. That probably just happened earlier out East. **[On later trips, my opinion would once again be that Pentagon City was overpriced, and I'd find other places that offered the same or better food at lower prices.]**

I had a combo meal from Taco Bell and then went to Auntie Annie's to get a sugary pretzel for dessert. It took maybe fifteen minutes to do that, but we'd scheduled a full hour before we'd be meeting back. **[I'm not really a mall person, so I almost always have lots of time to kill while the kids go shopping.]**



The Smithsonian's complete display on the history of American electronics and invention

After lunch we took a train over to the Archives—Navy Memorial station. Some of the kids had thought it would be interesting to see the National Archives, but unfortunately there was a massive line that made it impractical to do so. We saw the grand steps to the building and the line outside, but none of the famous documents.

We subdivided into three separate groups (four, counting those who went to the Holocaust Museum this morning) and set out to explore different things. I attempted to give directions to the other groups on how to reach their destinations. Unfortunately, not only do I really not know Washington all that well, but the metro isn't really terribly convenient to most tourist destinations. We weren't really where I thought we were, and my directions wouldn't have

been very helpful. Fortunately, everyone must have asked someone who actually did know, and they all got where they wanted to go.

My group's first destination was the National Museum of American History, the Smithsonian's grand tribute to our country's distant and recent past. I've described this museum at length in previous travelogues, so I'll shorten up the synopsis here. It remains one of my favorite museums anywhere.

That said, I was less than thrilled with their recent renovation. While I'm sure it helps with traffic flow and also makes things more user-friendly, to me the changes seem to "dumb down" the overall museum. There's obviously less stuff actually on display than there used to be. They still have all the most famous artifacts (the original Star-Spangled Banner from Ft. McHenry, Dorothy's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*, and the inaugural gowns worn by all the First Ladies), but a lot of the "lesser" items have been taken off display.

I was looking forward to seeing their exhibit on electronics and invention, for instance. It turned out, though, that some of our country's greatest achievements had been reduced to about a dozen artifacts in a tiny, out-of-the-way case. Comparing the displays you'd think Edison and Bell were trivial, while Carol Burnett (whose curtain gown parodying *Gone with the Wind* is a featured exhibit) was a cornerstone of history.

After seeing the history museum we took the metro to Federal Center and walked about half a mile from there to the U.S. Capitol. (Like most points of interest in Washington, there are several metro stops equally inconvenient from the Capitol.) We assumed we'd only be able to snap a few distant pictures, but it turned out we could get right up to the steps in front of the building. This was probably because Congress was not currently in session, but it was still a nice surprise. When we'd been here in 2004, the whole area for blocks in any direction from the Capitol was blocked off with cement barriers, and tourists couldn't go anywhere remotely close without special permission. It was nice to have things back the way they should be.

Two of the girls who were with me have a strong interest in politics and vague ambitions about entering careers in that area themselves. They were thrilled to be able to get so close to the Capitol and dreamed of working inside the building as public servants in the future. We snapped their pictures, both together and individually, and everyone had a great time seeing the seat of our nation's government. **[One of these girls ended up majoring in medicine, but the last I heard the other was finishing up a political science major at a very liberal college in the Twin Cities.]**



**Garrigan girls pose
outside the White House and the U.S. Capitol**

Our next stop was the White House, and again we were pleasantly surprised that there wasn't overwhelming security. While understandably you can't actually go onto the grounds or inside the building without an invitation, at McPherson Square you can get right up to a fence at the edge of the President's back yard. The primary purpose of that fence appears to be a "photo op" for tourists, and our group joined right in. I could imagine the Obamas gazing out at us as we posed there, though in fact the President was flying to New Orleans today to check on the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.



The north side is the "back" of the White House, and the girls wanted to see the more famous south façade. That side isn't nearly so accessible and friendly. The closest you can get is across Pennsylvania Avenue, and there are barriers, police tape, and guards to keep the crowds where they're supposed to be and well away from any dignitaries who might be nearby.

The most interesting thing we saw in the White House compound was the TV reporters' area. It's impossible to watch the evening news without seeing the White House correspondents reporting from the South Lawn, and it was fascinating to see where they originate from. The broadcast area is to the west side of the White House, well away from the main flow of traffic. There was an impromptu stage set up in the



Television area on the South Lawn of the White House

area, and in a suit was talking into a microphone as we made our way past. The umbrellas you can see in the picture above cover various types of TV equipment. It was not even close to raining, and I don't know if they were being used as parasols to shade the camera operators and technicians or if they helped with lighting. The whole thing was certainly interesting to see, though.

In addition to the formal TV area, we saw a freelance reporter who was apparently making a documentary. He stood in front of the White House and went through a very rehearsed "spontaneous" interview with a passerby he obviously knew. I couldn't tell you what point he was making, or even if he was left, right, or center politically.

We also saw a couple small groups of protestors. One was calling for our immediate exit from Afghanistan. In theory I agree with that, but the reality (as our President has found) is that it's a lot easier said than done. The other group was somehow protesting the oil spill. I'm not sure who or what exactly they were protesting for or against. It may well be they just protest for the sake of protesting, and this disaster was the latest "cause de jour". I had friends in college who were like that. They didn't seem to care what the issue was, but they always had to be fighting against something.

Unlike the professional activists, there are many issues on which I can see both sides (or often even more sides than two), and oil drilling is one of them. It would be wonderful if we'd move beyond oil to other forms of energy, but so far no one has found a practical way to power cars, planes, trucks, and trains by solar or wind power. We should certainly keep developing alternative fuel sources, but until they're practical we still need to use what we know works. I'm not a great fan of offshore drilling, but it does have the advantage of being located nearby rather than coming from unstable foreign countries. The key is that it needs to be done responsibly and in a way that doesn't seriously damage the environment. As more and more comes out on this tragedy, it appears BP acted in anything but a responsible way. We need to learn from what they did wrong and make sure this doesn't happen again. Unfortunately the only two voices we seem to hear in the debate are "drill baby, drill" and "stop everything now". This is one of many issues on which the President has taken middle ground, and he's been blamed by both sides for not being more extremist.

[While extremists on the right keep trying to call him a "radical", President Obama really is very much a moderate. It would be fascinating to know just how much our government could have accomplished if only the Republicans had been willing to work with a Black man. Unfortunately most of Congress would seem to prefer that the government literally do nothing than to work with out President on even the most trivial of points. It really is sad how they've acted, because the Obama Presidency could have accomplished a lot.]

Across from the White House is the National Christmas Tree. I hadn't realized this was an actual live tree, rather than something trucked in like the ones at Rockefeller Center and Daley Plaza. **[Apparently from the 1920s through the 1960s a different tree was used each year. It was President Nixon who first established a living Christmas tree, in keeping with the environmental awareness that spread through the country toward the end of his Presidency. They have used four living trees since then, the most recent since 2012.]** It looks rather barren without decorations, but it is a handsome evergreen. Looking at it, I was reminded of one of the first students I taught, Brett Schneider. Brett was a freshman when I started at Garrigan, and I taught him all four years he was in high school. He went on to become a doctor and now works at Walter Reed Medical Center, just north of Washington. Brett is one of the few students that years later would directly thank me for teaching him. In particular, he was grateful that I'd taught him Spanish because that was how he was able to meet his wife, who happens to be from Honduras. I thought of Brett while looking across from the White House because last Christmas I got an e-mail card from him that featured a picture of him and his kids standing in front of the National Christmas Tree. They'd gotten tickets to go to the official tree lighting and went to the event as a family.

We had a long walk back to the McPherson Square metro station. On a map it looks like just a short hop, but it was easily more than half a mile. It started raining as we rode the train back to East Falls Church, and by the time we got there it was pouring. While everyone dashed down the bike path, we were all thoroughly soaked by the time we got back to the hotel. At that, we were impacted much less by the rain than another of our little sub-groups. The twosome that had gone to the Holocaust Museum this morning was at Arlington Cemetery when the storm started. They got soaked walking to the station. They boarded a train, but then just outside the station the power went off. Apparently all the service on the blue and yellow lines was cut. They were on a stopped train without air conditioning for more than half an hour. When it did start moving again, they next platform was absolutely swamped with people, and the remainder of their journey was crowded to say the least. The girl and her mother did eventually manage to make it back, but they had a bit more eventful afternoon than they'd planned.

Before too long all the different groups made their way back to the hotel. They'd all seen different things, but everyone seemed to have a good time. Our captain's parents ordered pizza, and most of the group enjoyed that for dinner. Pizza didn't sound at all good to me, though, so I just passed. **[Pizza delivery is a staple for lots of people, but it's something I just never do.]**

I'd read beforehand that the tournament sponsors were holding an orientation session Thursday night to clarify rules and get players familiar with the tournament format. While the session was optional, I wanted our kids to attend. At first most of them were less than eager to do so. Everyone but our captain seemed to prefer sitting around in their rooms and watching TV to going to orientation. The captain was with me on this, though, and he eventually talked everyone else into going as well. All the kids and I crammed into the blue suburban, and we made our way over to Marymount University, the site of the tournament.

They've done some major additions at Marymount since the last time we were there. The biggest was that the parking lot we had used before has been eliminated. On that location they're building a large building that will apparently combine dorm rooms and classroom space. I instead had to drive to a much more cramped lot right by the main entrance. I'm horrible at parking large vehicles, but I managed to get the suburban in a space after only two or three tries. We then made our way down a steep hill to the auditorium where the orientation would be held.

As he's done most years we've come to nationals, Chip Beall, the tournament manager, greeted me by name and seemed genuinely glad I was there. I have trouble remembering people I saw yesterday, but Mr. Beall seems to have no trouble remembering those he sees once a year or less. **[Of course, the fact that those people have brought him thousands of dollars in income may have something to do with that.]** We exchanged pleasantries, and he told me I should see their secretary in the main campus dorm to get permits for the suburbans. I left the kids and ran up to do that.

Both Mr. Beall and the secretary also asked if we happened to have an electronic buzzer system with us. Many teams own such equipment, but we don't. That's partly because they cost about \$500 a set, but also because most of the tournaments in our area don't use them. Instead the local tournaments have kids indicate that they want to answer questions by just slapping the table in front of them. Questions Unlimited, which sponsors this tournament, also sells buzzer systems, and they normally provide their own at nationals. Apparently there had been a baggage mix-up after the first phase of the tournament, though, and one of the buzzers they'd used in New Orleans was still there. They were attempting to have it shipped overnight to Washington, but they wanted a back-up in case it didn't make it.



Website view of a typical quiz bowl buzzer system

[Northern Iowa does seem to be unique in using the “slap” method of signaling. Even a little way south or east of here buzzers are the norm. We participated in a tournament this winter in Waukee (a suburb of Des Moines) where they had a fundraiser for an organization that helps schools buy buzzers at a discount. I suppose that's a good thing, but the equipment still seems like a waste of money to me. Even as other electronics have become cheaper, buzzers remain about \$500 a system. Most schools use them at most half a dozen times a year, and it's only on those rare occasions that many people want to signal at once that a

lock-out system is superior to the alternative. To my mind they just don't warrant the expense.]

When I got back from checking in, there were still only a handful of people in the room (apparently four total teams), but the orientation had already started. They did this in the form of a mock game, which was both fun and useful for the kids. They had kids volunteer to play, mixing up people from different schools on the two teams. Our captain was the captain of one of the teams, and his team also included the junior girl who was one of our top players. One of our senior girls played on the opposing team. The three Garrigan kids all answered toss-up questions, and our captain did a really good job captaining his team. The captain of the other team served as a good example of how **not** to play the game, because he didn't listen to the other players—particularly to our girl. On several of the bonus and lightning round questions she had correct answers that she had clearly said, but he either said something else or passed and left the question unanswered. A couple of times our captain heard her correct answers and gave them when it was his team's turn to answer—earning points that should rightly have gone to the other team. His team ended up winning fairly decisively, but all our kids on both teams did a good job. You could even consider this our first “win”, since two out of four of the winning players were from Garrigan (and so was the best player—if not the captain—on the losing team). I figured even if we were 0 –6 in the other games, we'd brag about this one.

They went through a full-length game, pausing periodically to explain how the different kinds of questions worked and to give advice on how the kids should treat different parts of the game. There is no one set of rules in quiz bowl. Every tournament is different, and the kids agreed once they had gone through it that the orientation was valuable because it helped them think about the unique rules they use at nationals. Most of them initially hadn't wanted to come, but they were glad they did.

[There are some people who would like to see a single set of rules for quiz bowl. One of them is the sponsor of the tournament we went to in Waukee, who has founded an organization called the Iowa Quiz Bowl Association to promote what he thinks is the “right” way to play the game. He doesn't care much for the tournament I host or for the National Academic Championships (which are shunned by a lot of quiz bowl nerds in favor of their competitor, an organization called National Academic Quiz Tournaments). I'll guarantee you that kids have more fun at our tournament than his, though.]

After the game the kids had a nice visit with a team from a small town in Pennsylvania that had also come to orientation. While theirs was a public school, its size and location were similar to ours. Most of the teams at nationals are from big suburban schools, and talking to other small town kids made our group feel more at home.

I took the wrong exit out of the parking lot and ended up heading north on Glebe Street instead of south. I almost hit a car while making a U-turn to get headed the right direction. Fortunately I didn't, and before long we were going the right way. The kids wanted to stop at a grocery store, so I pulled into a Safeway along Lee Highway. The store looked small on the outside, but inside it seemed enormous. It was also a very elegant store, both in its décor and in the upscale food items they stocked. I bought some crackers, cheese, and juice, and each of the kids seemed to buy enough to feed an army.

Coming back I took a wrong turn getting to the hotel. Instead of pulling into the Econolodge lot, I ended up on the access road for I-66. I had to drive down to the metro station and then back up to Lee Highway, circle around and go about half a block further before turning again. The turn was not well marked—especially at night—and I almost missed it the second time, too.

It was still fairly early (9:15 or so) when we got back to the hotel. I did a bit of reading but mostly relaxed. It had been a long, but enjoyable day.

Friday, June 4 **Arlington & Falls Church, Virginia**

I was up about 7:15. I had a bite of breakfast and then made a little hike around the area near the hotel. I'd done this when we stayed here before, though the neighborhood has filled in a bit since then. There are lots of new condo buildings, plus a number of snooty little cafes and coffee bars where presumably the yuppies who live in those apartments spend their excess cash.

About 8:45 we all piled in the suburbans and drove over to Marymount. With seven students, four chaperons, and five spectators, the vehicles were packed to capacity, but we made it work. We parked and left the suburbans, but then someone realized they'd left a camera inside the black, one so we had to go back. That invited a familiar site on this trip—the car alarm going off. I'd mentioned that the black suburban had every electronic device imaginable. One of those things was a car alarm that automatically turned on whether we wanted it to or not. Whenever the vehicle was locked by anything other than the electronic clicker on its main set of keys, the alarm would engage. (The clicker itself allowed you to choose whether to engage it or not.) Then, whenever it was disturbed—and “disturbed” meant being opened with a key rather than the clicker—the alarm would go off. Lights would flash, and the horn would honk, all for no good reason. It would all stop when any appropriate key (either the main one with the clicker or the extra set of keys that didn't have the extra electronics) was placed in the ignition, but you couldn't stop it any other way. The whole thing was ridiculous and a bit embarrassing. Someone at Chevy apparently thought this was a good feature, though, and we were stuck with it.

[We still have the black suburban, which is now the oldest of the school vehicles. A couple years ago one of the coaches lost the main key, so now the one that triggers the alarm is the only key we have for that vehicle. Most of the time when I take kids anywhere in it I just keep the thing unlocked and tell the kids to take their stuff with them. That's not always possible, though, so we still end up hearing the alarm far too often. I'm sure false alarms like this are common on other vehicles, too, so it's no surprise passersby routinely ignore car alarms.]

Once the camera was rescued and the car was re-locked, we made our way down a different hill to Rowley Hall. This strange building is mostly a dorm, but it has the college's main administrative offices on its first floor and classrooms on two basement levels below that. **[The building I lived in at UNI, Bartlett Hall, has been renovated into a similar set-up.]** We'd arrived quite a bit before our first game, so we killed some time in the lobby before going downstairs. We soon struck up a conversation with a well-dressed older man who turned out to be the President of Marymount University. While he didn't say it directly, he obviously had no clue there was a high school academic competition taking place on campus. He was pleased to see us and made us feel quite welcome, though. He conveniently had a son who had gone to graduate school at the University of Iowa, which gave us a minimal common bond. **[It was also convenient that Gene was an administrator himself. The two of them chatted pretty much the whole time we waited.]**

The college president pointed out the lovely view from to the east of the lobby, which was presumably also the view from his office. Marymount is at the highest point in Arlington, and it looks out at the highest point in Washington, where National Cathedral is located. Just east of the Marymount campus is a country club that apparently has many of the movers and shakers of the country among its members. (I gather the college president was also a member there.) He pointed out that lots of important people live in Arlington. “You could be standing in line at the supermarket,” he said, “and in front of you is a Supreme Court justice.” That made the kids ponder our shopping trip last night and wonder who else might have been at Safeway.

While it was interesting to schmooze with the college president, we were here for competition. Our first game was at 9:45, in a lecture hall buried in the second basement of Rowley Hall. We were playing Blue Ridge. Ahead of time I'd scouted out schools of that name online, and I'd found them in Kentucky (no surprise), West Virginia, and South Carolina. It turned out this Blue Ridge was none of the ones I'd found. They were instead from New Milford, Pennsylvania. This is a mostly rural area, though not far from the college town of Binghamton, New York, where I'd spent some time a couple years ago. It's also less than an hour from Scranton, and in about the same time it takes to get from Algona to Des Moines the students at Blue Ridge could be in New York City.

[Something I wish the tournament directors would do is to provide a master list of all the schools in the tournament, together with their location. They just list a short name—like “Blue Ridge”—on the schedule, so every year we go through an awkward search to try to figure out who we're actually playing.]

Blue Ridge was a good team for us to have as our first game at nationals. They weren't in any way intimidating. In fact, they were very much like the teams we face all the time in regional competition. While it wasn't a runaway, our kids led this game from beginning to end. We ended up winning 195 – 120. It gave them good confidence to start things off with a definite win.

When we'd gotten the tournament schedule, our second opponent was identified simply as “Jackson”. I knew half the schools in the South were named after Andrew Jackson. Just about every place of size besides Jackson, Mississippi (where the schools are named mostly named after Civil Rights heroes) has a Jackson High School. While this school was southern, it turned out its namesake was not Old Hickory. Instead we were facing Stonewall Jackson High School from just down the road in Manassas, Virginia.



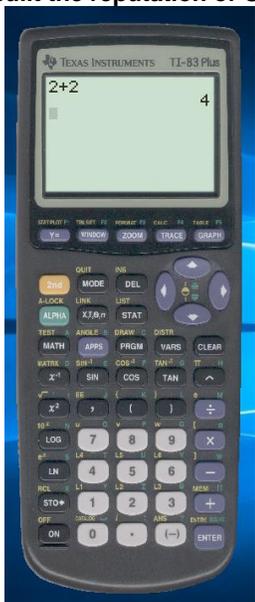
Bishop Garrigan quiz bowl team at the National Academic Championships – Arlington, Virginia

[The picture shows Anna Kollasch, Rebecca Erdman, Jake Rosenmeyer, Brittany Berte, Alex Hamilton, Michael Fakler, Michael Hellman, and Coach David Burrow. Every one of these people was described in the previous summer’s quiz bowl travelogue, which I’m pretty sure is why I didn’t bother writing about them at the beginning of this one. Jake, our captain on this trip, is now on the staff at Garrigan as a religion teacher. He’ll be a chaperon when we take the team to Chicago this coming summer. Jake is still close friends with Michael Fakler (his college roommate, who now lives in Sioux Falls and works in computer science), Michael Hellman (who is a teacher at a rural school not far from Algona), and Anna Kollasch (who is currently doing an internship in the lab at a Sioux City hospital). Brittany Berte went to Creighton University in Omaha, I think as a pharmacy major. All through college she volunteered to work at the quiz bowl tournament we host at Garrigan each fall. Since they graduated, I’ve heard the least from Alex Hamilton (who went to Wartburg College in Waverly and whose youngest brother is now a junior at Garrigan) and Becky Erdman (who went to Macalester College in St. Paul). This group as much as anyone built the reputation of Garrigan quiz bowl that continues to this day.]

While most people haven’t heard of the place since Civil War times, Manassas today is one of the fastest-growing places in America. It’s right at the edge of suburban Washington, the place where people move to in search of spacious, affordable homes. Driving through there, it reminded me a lot of Ankeny, Iowa or Lakeville, Minnesota. I personally wouldn’t care to live there, but as suburbs go it’s a nice enough place.

The school we were facing also reminded me of Ankeny, who we’ve often faced in regional tournaments. They’re big, and their students seem a bit stuck on themselves. They’re in no way super-human, though, and we were very competitive with them. While they ended up beating us, we were in it all the way. The final score was 180 – 160, which is a margin of just one question. We didn’t win, but we didn’t really feel like we lost either.

[While scouting out Stonewall Jackson High School, one of the things I did was visit their school website. While there I downloaded a tool that I still use frequently to this day. It’s a virtual TI-83 graphing calculator. While reproduced at a small size at left, the “real” virtual calculator fills up nearly the height of the computer screen. At school my computer is hooked up to a projector, so it’s easy to use the virtual calculator to show students how use complicated features like working with matrices or graphing trigonometric functions. At home I can take screen shots from the virtual calculator, which I’ll use on worksheets and tests. At the time I downloaded it, this was the only virtual graphing calculator in existence, and it probably violated copyright. Today Texas Instruments itself offers a free download that emulates its products on computers and cell phones.]



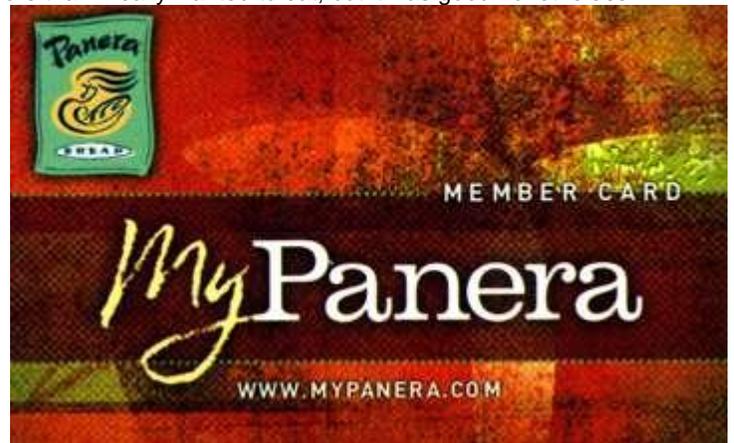
The kids had already done better than they did last year at nationals, so they were feeling pretty good. One of our girls works at the local radio station, and she called them with the results of our games so far. They interviewed her at some length, and I gather the story was replayed many times. That probably means there was not much happening in Algona this week, but it was still good to have some coverage.

After the second game we drove southward on Glebe Street to Ballston, a high-rise neighborhood south of Lee Highway. Marymount has a second “campus” here, a hideously ugly blue metal tower that houses their school of business. Our parking permit allowed us to park both at the main lot and in the Ballston lot. We took advantage of that when we went to lunch today. I knew there was a mall called Ballston Common not far from the Marymount business school. I’d never actually been to that mall, but I knew it was accessible from the Ballston metro station, which is just a couple blocks east of the blue tower. Ballston Common turned out to be more than a little bit tricky to find, and we got thoroughly lost in the process. We passed lots of apartment towers, lots of office buildings, and lots of expensive hotels. A few of the buildings had businesses at street level, but there was nothing we could pretend was a mall and very little that would be appropriate for kids to have lunch. We stopped twice to ask people for directions. Everyone agreed the mall was nearby, but no one could seem to say just exactly where it was. We seemed to go all over everywhere before eventually happening upon the place almost by accident. **[It turns out the mall is NOT directly connected to the metro station; it’s about two blocks away, though if you know which street to take (Stuart Street) it’s a straight shot. Ballston Common occupies the lower floors of a mixed-use tower that includes corporate and government offices and luxury condominiums. I think the main entrance must be from a parking ramp, because it’s barely labeled at all from the sidewalk.]**

The main point to Ballston Common seems to be its food court. There really aren’t a lot of stores here (a small Macy’s is the only anchor, and a lot of the shop space is for lease), but they’ve got just about any type of food you could imagine. **[A fourteen-screen cineplex is another major draw.]** If we come back on a future trip, I’ll have to remember that, because it’s a quicker and easier lunch stop than Pentagon City. **[We actually didn’t do that on future trips, because they moved the tournament site away from Marymount.]** I assume this is where all the people who work in the office buildings go to work; apparently none of them shop while they’re at it.

The group went half a dozen different directions for lunch. Pizza, tacos, and Japanese noodles seemed to be the most common choices, but there was a little bit of everything. I ended up eating at Panera, where I had a nice combo that featured a hearty bowl of chicken tortilla soup and a plate of Greek salad. It was honestly more than I really wanted to eat, but it was good nonetheless.

The girl who checked me out insisted on giving me a Panera frequent guest card, which she said I could use to earn valuable rewards. I presented it to the cashier at the Panera in downtown Minneapolis a couple weeks later. She’d never seen such a thing and called her manager when I gave it to her. Apparently it’s an experimental program that they’re only trying out in the East. The Minnesota store said I was probably the first Midwesterner to have one. They couldn’t do anything with it there, and they said the program probably wouldn’t be introduced nationwide until at least fall. **[I’d forgotten that the MyPanera card I still have came from Washington. The program is now nationwide, and I’ve used it at many different locations. The “valuable rewards” tend to be either discounts on future purchases or one item free with the purchase of something else. It’s still not a bad program, though.]**



The walk from the mall to the business school was much quicker than what we’d had the other direction. The two are actually fairly close, once you know the lay of things. Getting out of the parking lot was a challenge, though. The main exit leads you right onto I-66. That wasn’t really what we wanted, but we had little choice. We ended up going west an exit, getting off right in front of the East Falls Church metro station. We then made our way up to Lee Highway and back to the main Marymount campus. **[Marymount has apparently relocated their Ballston facility. The old building at Glebe & Fairfax is now part of George Washington University, while Marymount has moved to the other side of the mall, east of the metro station.]**

There was still quite a bit of time to kill before our next game, so we watched a game with two teams we didn’t know. A team from Pennsylvania faced a team from New York in this game, and we wished we could be playing either of them instead of the teams we’d been assigned. Both of these teams were **bad**. There were a lot of questions our kids thought were easy that went unanswered, and several other times the teams gave answers that had nothing to do with what was being asked. It turned out that the teams we were watching were actually JV-level teams. They just started a JV division just this year, which featured teams with mostly freshmen and sophomores (like we’ve had the past two years) to play similar teams instead of getting overwhelmed by seniors. It would have been nice for our mostly sophomore team to have had that opportunity in New Orleans, but that was a year too soon. Pennsylvania, by the way, seemed really over-represented in this tournament. There were at least half a dozen teams from the Keystone State, easily more than from anywhere else. I suppose that’s because it’s a short, easy trip from Pennsylvania to D.C., but then there weren’t that many teams from Virginia—and none at all from places like Maryland and Delaware.

Our first game this afternoon was against another of those Pennsylvania teams. Monessen is southeast of Pittsburgh, just east of the area we passed through on our way out to Washington. It was once a thriving steel town and at one time was the size of Burlington or Mason City. Apparently the place is a case study in rust belt decline, though. Today it’s just slightly larger than Algona (around 8,000 people **[apparently down to about 7,000 now]**), or a fourth of what it was at its peak.

Monessen High School is of a similar size to many of the schools we play in our area—Algona High, Spirit Lake, MOC—Floyd Valley, and Boone, for instance. While those schools are about double our size, we're always competitive with them, and we also played well against Monessen. We ended up beating them 225 – 150—not exactly domination, but a definite win.

Our final game today was our biggest loss. We played Wilson High School from Florence, South Carolina. Wilson is roughly eight times the size of Garrigan. Size certainly isn't everything, but they also were a very good team. We were behind through pretty much the whole game, and the final score was 270 – 140. One good thing about a decisive loss was that it gave me a chance to put in all the alternates.

Even though we lost this game, everyone was still excited to have two wins (and a 50% winning percentage) after our first day of competition. We've gone to nationals many times, but most years we've ended up with a losing record. In fact, more than once we were completely winless. Only one time, our very first trip in 1995, had we won more than two games, and there was a very definite possibility we could do that this year. The girl who works there again called the radio station with our progress, and then we made our way back to the motel.

We've almost always done some sort of a "team meal" on our quiz bowl trips, the same sort of things sports teams do before their big games. Mr. Meister had said he and [his wife] wanted to treat the team to a nice dinner on this trip, and I was certainly willing to take them up on that offer. Shortly after 5:00 we drove about a mile west on Lee Highway to the Falls Church Applebees. The manager was less than excited to see a big group on a Friday night and asked if we had called ahead. I pointed out that I'd checked their website and it said they didn't take reservations, so I figured we shouldn't call. He grumbled a little, but he was able to seat us in less than five minutes. We ended up at three separate tables in the bar, which was actually about the best set-up they could have come up with.



**Gene and MaryAnn Meister at Applebees
Falls Church, Virginia**

[We put a photographic tribute to Gene on the school website after he died. Most of the pictures we used were either of him coaching baseball or sitting at a large desk as the superintendent. We used the picture at left on that tribute as well, though. Both he and Mary Ann look truly happy, and I think it's the way he'd want to be remembered.]

Applebees has a wide and varied menu, and everyone found stuff they liked. The service was good, and the food was tasty, and everyone had a wonderful time. The kids all made a point of thanking Meisters for their generosity. They had definitely gone out of their way to be nice to us.

After dinner we mostly relaxed back at the motel. I took the metro over to Ballston. There was a good chance we'd be using that station tomorrow, and I wanted to see how it related to the neighborhood. It turned out to be both closer and more convenient to the Marymount business school than the mall had been.

I spent quite a bit of time this evening checking out the websites of the schools we'd played. I've been responsible for the Garrigan website for some time now, and I'm proud to say that we have one of the most comprehensive and interesting high school sites anywhere. **[That remains true today, even though now the site I'm responsible for is no longer the "official" school website.]** Most of our opponents had very bad school websites. Indeed, in most cases I was able to find out more about the schools from Wikipedia than from the schools' own web pages. Only two of the schools even acknowledged on their websites that they had quiz bowl teams at all, and one of those had just a generic page that noted the team existed but said nothing whatsoever about it.

The most interesting website I visited was for Stonewall Jackson High School. School was still in session there, but they didn't bother mentioning their team's trip to nationals in their daily announcements. They did, however, have a fairly extensive sub-section for their quiz bowl team. Among the things they had there was a letter from their coach to players and parents with details of their team's trip. It intrigued me that even though Manassas is just half an hour west of Arlington, the team chose to stay overnight during the tournament. In fact, they were in a much more expensive hotel than we were, the Key Bridge Marriott in Rosslyn. I've actually stayed in that hotel, though that stay was more than three decades ago. When I came to Washington for Presidential Classroom as a junior in high school, all the delegates stayed at the Key Bridge Marriott. It may have changed a lot since then, but my impression in 1979 was honestly not that good. The rooms were larger than those at the Econolodge, but there wasn't anything at all luxurious about them. Among other things, breakfast is not included at the Marriott. The Jackson team was instructed to budget \$10 per person to pay for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. **[The Marriott is a concrete high rise from the '60s. It appears that it's been renovated many times since I stayed**

there back when Jimmy Carter was President, and today it gets fairly decent reviews. It's interesting that the Econolodge Metro is actually ranked higher than the Marriott on TripAdvisor, though. That doesn't mean the Econolodge is the better hotel, but it is perceived as providing better value for the money. Certainly few of the amenities the Marriott provides would be of much interest to high school kids.]

Eventually I went to bed and got a pretty decent night's sleep.

Saturday, June 5 **Arlington, Virginia & Washington, D.C.**

I was up seven-ish this morning, but it wasn't until around 8:30 when we set out for the day. Traffic was light on the weekend, and we made it to Marymount without any problems. We again made our way to Rowley Hall and then down to the basement for more competition.

Our first game today was against another local team, Yorktown High School. I mean "local" quite literally. This is not **the** Yorktown where Cornwallis surrendered. That's down in the Hampton Roads region near Williamsburg and Jamestown. Many places in the American colonies took their name from northern England's cathedral city, and the place we played is today a neighborhood in the northern part of Arlington. Yorktown Boulevard runs straight west from the Marymount Campus, and the high school is less than a mile west of here.

While Yorktown High School is officially part of the Arlington County School System, it's definitely not your typical urban public school. Very likely those Supreme Court justices the college president spoke of send their kids here. On their school website Yorktown (home of the Patriots) notes that more than half of their 1,700 students take advanced placement classes, and they also boast of their numerous national merit scholars.



Garrigan starters before the Yorktown game

[The picture reminds me that something very unique about our team in 2010 was that the majority of the starters were girls. Quiz bowl, both at Garrigan and other schools, tends to be dominated by boys. In fact this summer we'll be taking an all-male team to Chicago. A lot of teams have a token girl, who mostly is expected to answer art and literature questions, but it's really unusual for three of four players to be female.]

Yorktown ended up being one of the top four teams in the tournament, and it's not really a surprise we lost to them. We did give them one of their closest games, though. They had to come from behind to defeat us 265 – 205.

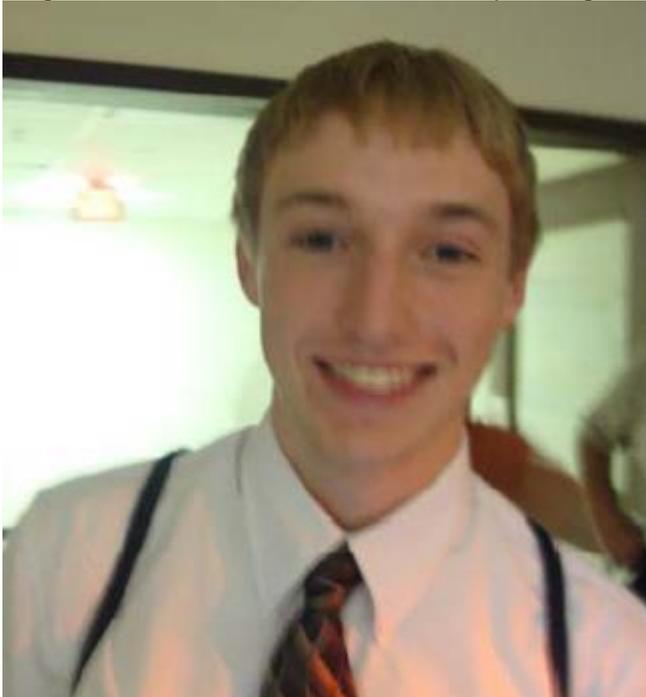
We drove down to the Marymount business school and then walked a couple blocks east to the Ballston metro station. We had an uneventful ride over to Rosslyn, but when we transferred to the blue line there we had quite a bit of entertainment. There was a huge crowd on this train, most of them the remnants of "Race for the Cure", a cancer event that was held earlier today in downtown Washington. It was already standing room only on the train when we boarded, and a big crowd on the Rosslyn platform tried to push their way on board. The driver (a black man with a Caribbean accent) snapped at people to keep moving and board quickly. "Get your %#@ on board," he bellowed to one woman, "We need to keep moving!"

The driver again got agitated when a handicapped passenger boarding at Arlington Cemetery caused a minor delay. He got positively incensed, though, at the Pentagon City stop, where we got off. He attempted twice to close the doors with people in them. Lots of people were trying to get on and off, and it took a while to get everybody to push through the crowd. First the driver tried to close the doors with people standing in the doorway. Subway doors don't spring back like those on an elevator. Fortunately, though, the Washington metro is designed so that it can't move unless the doors are fully closed. This was long before everyone had finished getting on and off. "Open the %*#@ doors!" several people shouted. Eventually the driver did so, but he followed it up with "MOVE IT!!!! This train has a schedule to keep!" He soon closed the doors again and sped off. I counted to be sure our group was accounted for and was truly thankful we were. I've never seen a driver with such an attitude.

[I wrote to WMATA after this trip to vent my frustration with this and the many other incidents we'd encountered on the metro during this trip. The letter wasn't even acknowledged, which pretty much tells you how much they value their customers.]

After lunch we had a much less eventful metro ride back, and we got back to the college in good time for our final game. Our opponent this time was Gilmer High School. Again we had no information ahead of time except the school name. Checking that out, I thought it was most likely they were from central Texas, and I'd also found a school in West Virginia with that name. It turned out that neither of those was who we played. They were from Ellijay, the seat of Gilmer County, Georgia. "Head north from Atlanta," said their captain, "and when you hear the banjo music, you're there." I'm not sure Gilmer's students are quite the back woods hicks their captain made them out to be, and while it may be rural, Gilmer's 1200 high school students would definitely **not** make them small by Iowa standards.

This was an incredibly close game. We led for much of it, but Gilmer had a fortunate choice in the lightning round (the various gifts in "The Twelve Days of Christmas") that helped them take the lead. **[Interestingly that same category has come up in lightning rounds at several other tournaments we've been to—with questions provided from different sources than the national tournament.]** Neither team knew most of the "Stump the Experts" questions, but there were two of them that we knew. Those two were enough to make the difference, and we ended up winning 190 – 165.



Happiness after the final win

line car was air conditioned, though most of us were still recovering from the defective orange line car by the time we reached the Brookland—CUA station, our first destination this evening.

The "CUA" in Brookland—CUA stands for Catholic University of America, which is just west of the metro station. On the CUA campus is the Basilica National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the largest church in the Western Hemisphere (it was the biggest on earth until a church in the Ivory Coast surpassed it) and one of the most beautiful churches anywhere. I'd taken two previous quiz bowl groups to mass here, and I was pleased that again our schedule worked out so we could attend their Saturday night service. We followed a tour bus full of T-shirt clad high school kids, and I was pleased that our group was more appropriately dressed for church.

The shrine was beautiful, but honestly mass was less than inspiring. It was **very** formal, with lots of incredibly dull and unfamiliar music. The homily was also less than inspired. The priest said he was going to speak for five or ten minutes, but in fact he rambled on for more than twenty. The whole mass lasted close to an hour and a half. Our kids were all attentive, but I don't know that they really got much out of it—nor did I. **[Gene Meister actually dozed off during the homily, to the point that Mary Ann had poke him sharply. This brought back memories of my own parents at church when I was a kid.]**

A young couple sat in front of us, who were trying to keep tabs on four kids during mass. Two of them were among the obnoxious toddlers I've ever seen. At one point the mother went out to walk with one of the brats, leaving dad to control the others. One of the kids

Everyone was absolutely ecstatic after the Gilmer win. With three wins we'd tied Garrigan's best showing at nationals, and the whole tournament had really been a team effort. The come-from-behind win in our final game was especially gratifying to everyone. The kids were hugging each other and texting their friends back home. The adults congratulated everyone and couldn't snap enough pictures.

We drove back to the hotel, and the kids changed into slightly less dressy clothes. Then we walked down the bike path to East Falls Church station. This weekend East Falls Church was the western terminal of the orange line. They are in the process of building a new metro line to serve Dulles Airport, far west of here. That line will veer off from the orange line at East Falls Church, and this weekend they were doing construction on that connection. Because of that we boarded an eastbound train on what would normally be the westbound platform.

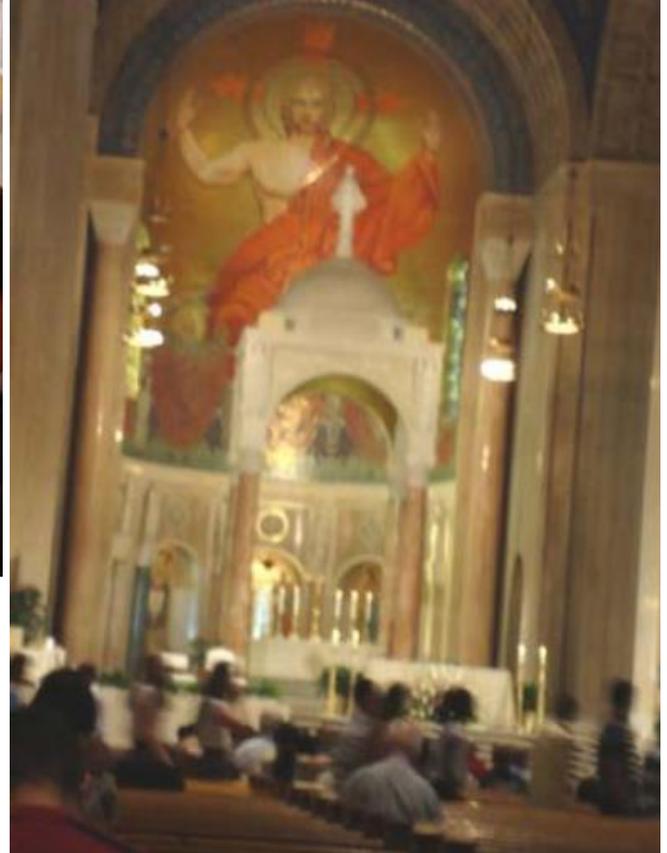
The car we boarded had some sort of problem with its ventilation. To say it was stuffy was an understatement. It was hot and close and just plain miserable all the way downtown. One of the adults was obviously not feeling well, and she grew sicker and sicker as we made our way east.

We transferred downtown to the red line. Fortunately the red

just went crazy and started batting at everything in sight. He ended up knocking a wooden slat that held the misallettes out of its groove, and it hit the floor with a bang. I helped the father put it back in place, while he continued to struggle to keep the kids under control. They really were more than a handful.



**Basilica National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, D.C.**



Since church had gone way overtime, we rushed as fast as we could to get to our next destination, a Washington Nationals baseball game. We took the red line up to Ft. Totten and then caught a green line train southward to the Navy Yard stop. Nationals Stadium [which—oddly—still doesn't have a corporate name] is obviously a bit of urban renewal, an attempt to bring gentrification to a neighborhood that's mostly rough and grungy. It's a pleasant modern stadium, but it doesn't really seem to have the character a lot of the other recent ballparks do. It looks like a big pile of concrete, and it feels as much like a shopping mall as an athletic venue. The view is also uninspired. Instead of overlooking the famous monuments or the waterfront, the park offers a "gorgeous" view of public housing.

The Nationals are the third attempt in modern times to bring big league baseball to the nation's capital. Unlike the two incarnations of the Washington Senators (now the Minnesota Twins and the Texas Rangers), the Nationals seem to actually draw a crowd. The same team averaged fewer than 10,000 fans a night in Montreal (less than many AAA teams attract), but they're drawing around 40,000 in D.C.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the Washington Nationals is their logo. The uniforms, the caps, the scoreboard, and various signs around the ballpark were all emblazoned with a script "W" that presumably stands for "Washington". The loopy "W" with a flourish to the left looks remarkably like the trademark for the Walgreens pharmacy chain, particularly since it's in the same white on red color scheme. The baseball logo is slightly slanted and has just a bit of a turn at the left. If you didn't see them side by side, though, you'd be hard pressed to identify one or the other. Apparently Walgreens is not a sponsor of the team, but it certainly looks like they get plenty of free advertising. That's probably what kept them from filing a trademark violation suit against the ball club. I must say I think both of the logos are rather ugly.



Are they really the Walgreens Nationals?

[I'm far from the only person who has noticed the similarity between these logos. While neither the baseball team nor the pharmacy officially acknowledges a resemblance, there are dozens of blogs on the internet that have commented on it.



Some of those blogs imply that it's the baseball team that should file an infringement suit against Walgreens, though clearly the pharmacy used the logo first. Bizarrely, the Walgreen corporation chose to file a lawsuit against an upstate New York grocery store chain called Wegman's whose logo was also a cursive "W". The former Wegman's logo (shown at left) is stylistically **MUCH** different from Walgreen's. The font is clearly different (unlike the Nationals' logo), and it's black on white, rather than white on red. Walgreen's claimed that the vaguely similar "W" logo might confuse customers into thinking that a luxury supermarket was actually a pharmacy, though, and they actually won the lawsuit. Wegman's today uses a simple sans serif "W", while the Nationals continue to sport ads for Walgreens on their caps.]

I like baseball, but I must confess I really could care less about the Washington Nationals. This wasn't a bad game, but not much about it really interested me. It didn't help that our seats were very high and provided what might best be called a birds-eye view of the game. Of our entire group, only Andrew Meister really seemed to care much about the game. **[Andrew remains a Nationals fan today, close to the only one in the Midwest.]** Even his grandfather, who is one of our baseball coaches, could take it or leave it. We ended up leaving after six innings, and I think Andrew Meister was the only one who wanted to stay any longer. There was already a big crowd headed to the metro when we left Nationals Stadium, so obviously we weren't the only ones to leave early.

We made our way back to the hotel, and then I loaded the kids into the suburban and we drove up to Marymount. There was a remote possibility we could make play-offs with a 3 – 3 record, and we had to check to be sure that didn't happen. It didn't, which was just as well. If we were in play-offs, we'd almost certainly be placed against one of the top seeds and instantly lose. That would leave us with a worse record than we had now. **[They've since simplified their playoff rules, so now all teams with four wins are automatically in playoffs, and those with fewer than that are out.]**



**David Burrow at the Nationals game
(I'm wearing a Tacoma Rainiers cap
Brad Nelson gave me earlier in the summer)**

While we were driving around Arlington, I noticed that the power meter on the blue suburban's dashboard was to the left of where it should be. Years ago on one of these trips (also to Washington) we'd had an issue with the white suburban. I'd turned off the air conditioner for the duration of that trip, and we made it back safely. Here I wondered if the problem wasn't that we'd been running all over town with the air conditioning on. That would put a drain on the battery, without providing much opportunity to charge it back up. I turned off the air, and the reading went up a bit, so I figured we'd just keep an eye on it and see how things went.

I got to bed as soon as I could and got at least a little sleep. I knew it would be a very short night, though. I had to take the two groups that had flown in back to the airport in the morning, and one of them needed to leave the hotel at 5am.

Sunday, June 6 **Arlington, Virginia to Mt. Laurel, N.J.**

I was up at 4:30 this morning, and soon met our captain's parents, and we headed out to the blue suburban for their trip to the airport. I-66 runs in a narrow trench through Arlington. It's a narrow four-lane highway with minimal shoulders and cement walls on both sides. This has to be an absolutely horrible route during rush hour, but at 5:00 on a Sunday morning we were literally the only car on the road. It was pleasantly cool, so I drove with the air conditioning off and the windows open. I was pleased that the power meter was in a more normal position than it was last night, and I hoped that a bit of freeway driving would help it out.

Ronald Reagan National Airport predates the freeway age, so it's not particularly easy to get to from the interstate. It's just about the closest-in major airports you'll find anywhere. The airport sits on the Potomac riverfront in downtown Arlington, just across the river from the main tourist area of Washington. We exited I-66 right at the Key Bridge Marriott where the Stonewall Jackson quiz bowl team was staying and drove south for about a mile and a half on streets (mostly old U.S. 1) past the towers of Rosslyn.

I'd been to National Airport exactly twice before in my life. That was on the same trip when I was a junior in high school. My main memory of that trip was that United Airlines went on strike while I was in Washington. I ended up at the airport with a deeply discounted ticket (\$99 round-trip from Cedar Rapids, I think) that no one wanted to honor. The TWA ticket desk was right next to United's empty area, and fortunately a woman there took pity on me. She routed me on a puddle-hopper that made three stops between Washington and Chicago. It got me there, though, and from O'Hare I was able to get back to Iowa. TWA hasn't existed for many years, and National Airport today looks completely different than I remember it. I remember a single terminal that was basically one long endless hallway. Today they officially have three terminals, though two of them are really just different parts of the same building. The building I remember has a whole new wing that gives it the shape of an "L". Then there's an entirely different building about half a mile to the north. The airport was built on the minimum possible land, and a cramped access road with extremely tight turns connects the different terminals. Fortunately

AirTran was at the beginning of the very first terminal. The Rosenmeyers got their stuff and made their way to the terminal. Apparently they got there in plenty of time, and their flights went well—much better than they'd gone on the trip out.

It had not been easy to get to the airport from I-66, and it was even harder to get from there back to the Econolodge. The airport exits are designed to funnel traffic onto the bridges that lead into Washington. There is no exit for I-66 west (which I what I really wanted). Instead I had to head north along the river for about four miles on the George Washington Parkway, an archaic limited access highway that was designed to look pretty rather than to move traffic. I took a left exit onto another quaint old road (Sprout Run Parkway) that led back south. I followed streets for a while, and then just east of Ballston (two or three miles west of the airport), I was able to join I-66 for the short run back to the hotel. I felt like I was completely lost, but this is precisely the "TO I-66" route marked on highway signs and the route advised by online services like Google maps.

I didn't really want to wake people up, so I spent the time between airport runs as an opportunity to gas up the vehicles. It amazed me just how busy a Sunoco station on Lee Highway was at 5:30 on a Sunday morning. Both times I stopped there nearly every pump was full. At \$2.69⁹, gas was no bargain in Arlington, but it wasn't as expensive as I'd feared it might be, either.

Once I finished buying gas, it was time to take Meisters to the airport. The whole point of these airport runs, by the way, was that the metro doesn't start service until 7am on Sundays. I can understand reduced weekend service, but 7:00 really seems quite late to me. I'd think there would be workers who would need to use it before then. Even if they just ran a train every half hour or so in the early morning hours, I'd think that would be useful. They don't, though. **[Actually 7:00 was a very recent improvement in weekend service. When we were here before the Metro hadn't opened on Sundays until 8am.]**

There was a bit more traffic at 6:30 than there had been at 5:00. It still wasn't heavy, though, and I made it to the airport without any problem. Meisters were flying Delta, which was in the middle of the terminal complex. There wasn't really anywhere to park near the Delta area, but I kept my emergency flashers on and just stopped in the middle of the loop road. No one said anything, and they got their stuff and made it into the terminal without a problem. Both of their flights would arrive early—a vestige of Northwest, which always padded the schedule for its flights.

I took a wrong turn on the way back from the airport and ended up on Lee Highway rather than the interstate. East of Ballston Lee Highway is a rather seedy area. There was nothing dangerous about the place on Sunday morning, but I doubt I'd have cared to go through there late at night. This wasn't the route I planned, but at least I knew it would eventually lead straight to the motel.

I stopped to get a bite of breakfast at the McDonalds on Lee Highway. I'd been to this same McDonalds on previous quiz bowl trips. It's within walking distance of the college (for me, at least), and it made a pleasant destination. One time we were there they had a breakfast buffet. They've discontinued that, but they still have the regular McD's breakfast menu. I had an Egg McMuffin and some coffee. The caffeine was particularly welcome after the short night.

We got things packed and were ready to leave about 9:30. When we'd stayed at this hotel in 2004, check-out was a nightmare. On that trip they had to run each night's stay for each room separately, and it took forever to process everything. This time the desk clerk had the folios for all the rooms pre-printed when I arrived. I checked to see that they were correct (which they were), and we were on our way.

We headed west on I-66 for just a couple miles to the Capital Beltway, and then turned north. There was plenty of traffic, but nowhere near what there would be on a weekday. We maintained about a 60mph speed all the way around the north side of the metro area. On the east edge of Washington we exited onto I-95, which we followed north for twenty miles to the Baltimore beltway. They've improved that road (I-695) since I was last here. It has six continuous lanes all the way around the city now, with additional lanes where other highways join it. We took the beltway to I-83 (the Jones Falls Expressway), a very archaic freeway that leads from the Pennsylvania Dutch country (about thirty miles north of here) straight into downtown Baltimore. We exited at 27th Street and made our way east through a rather grungy looking neighborhood to Remington Avenue. Just north of there was our first destination of the day, Charm City Cakes.



Charm City Cakes is featured

The team poses by the entrance to Charm City Cakes – Baltimore, Maryland

on the Food Network TV show *Ace of Cakes*. The bakery specializes in enormous, over-the-top cakes that typically look real-world things. They come across more like sculptures than cakes and really are edible works of art. The business is located in a stone building that once housed a church. Across Remington is a branch of the Baltimore police department, and across 29th Street is a trendy bar (which is occasionally seen on the TV show). The rest of the neighborhood looks like a lot of Baltimore—brick row houses and old strip buildings. It's not a pretty neighborhood, but there didn't appear to be anything particularly unsafe about it.



Charm City Cakes delivery van
residential areas anywhere around.

The main business at the exit we stopped at was a dumpy old strip mall that mostly featured a store called Acme. From the outside Acme looked a lot like a Pamida or Alco (a small discount store), though apparently it's a chain of supermarkets. I couldn't help but think of the Road Runner as we made our way through the parking lot. I never knew there was a real business that shared its name with the catalog the coyote always ordered from.

We had lunch at a Wendy's in Newark. Several in our group commented that this was one of the dirtiest fast food places we'd ever seen. Certainly it was about the worst one I'd been to in the "north". Then again most of Delaware would be south of the Mason—Dixon line, so perhaps they should be compared with Dixie.



I-295 bridge – Wilmington, Delaware
services" signs at the exits. New Jersey does a good job of having the right number of lanes on its highways, and as soon as we started

There's really nothing to see at Charm City Cakes, but we all had fun stopping by there nonetheless. The windows are covered over in dark plastic, and a sign on the door advises that entry is by appointment only. We were also discouraged from lingering by a construction crew that was working on the building façade. Out back we did see a white delivery van that figures prominently in the show (more than once they've built cakes that wouldn't fit inside it) and a couple of other vehicles that may have belonged to the owner or employees of the bakery. More than anything, stopping there made a nice break in the morning—and we're probably just about the only people in north central Iowa that can say they've been to this obscure Baltimore landmark.

We continued north on I-95, which is eight lanes wide all across Maryland. Traffic moved right along until we got to the Delaware border. The combination of a narrower highway, construction, and a toll plaza created a bottleneck. There was a bit of a delay, but the toll plaza was much worse headed the other direction.

My original plan had been to stop for lunch at a service area on the Delaware Turnpike. That was closed because of the construction, so we instead exited the highway at Newark. Decades ago my [aunt and uncle] and their family lived in Newark. I remember visiting them back in 1972 when Hurricane Agnes hit the eastern seaboard. I have absolutely no idea where exactly they lived. Newark is mostly home to the University of Delaware, and there doesn't appear to be much in the way of traditional

We drove on through Delaware (which is only about fifteen miles wide), and before long we were on a massive bridge over the Delaware River. This is listed as a toll bridge, but apparently they only collect toll from southbound traffic. Headed into New Jersey we just moved right along.

Most of the traffic exited either before or just across the bridge. West of the river I-95 leads north through downtown Wilmington and then straight through Philadelphia. On the east side the massive New Jersey Turnpike (a toll road that carries no number) carries huge volumes of traffic past chemical plants and office parks and on up to New York City. We stayed on I-295, which is a free highway that serves as an eastern beltway for Philadelphia. The south end of this is a practically empty four-lane highway through the forest. It's rural enough that they even have "next

getting into development, the road widened to six lanes. There was a bit of construction, but we still moved right along at 60 – 65mph.

We exited at Woodcrest. This isn't a town, but rather the name of one of the largest park-and-ride facilities I've ever seen. Woodcrest station has its own dedicated exit from the freeway, with the ramps leading to a series of parking lots that look like they could serve Disneyland. While almost every space was empty, the close-in lots were restricted to permit parking only, so we had a fair hike from a remote area.

Woodcrest serves PATCO, trains operated by the Port Authority Transportation Company. These connect the eastern suburbs with Philadelphia. On a previous quiz bowl trip I'd taken PATCO from Philly to Camden, the gritty city on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. Today's trip from the park-and-ride downtown would be a more typical journey on PATCO.

I had intended to put the PATCO tickets on the school credit card. Their vending machine accepted credit cards, but unfortunately it would only take them to purchase "Freedom cards", computer chip-embedded plastic cards that are intended for use by frequent commuters. The cards themselves cost \$5, in addition to the fare. The fare is actually cheaper when paid with a freedom card, but not enough so that it would be worthwhile to buy one for just a single round-trip. So instead I dug out just about all the cash and change I had on me to buy about \$70 worth of tickets. I was pleased to get rid of the golden dollars I'd gotten as change in Washington, but less pleased to empty out the paper money in my wallet.

We made it through the turnstiles and had just a short wait on the platform. The train had about half a dozen cars, but the driver stopped so that just the first car was by the platform. I suppose they run the same length of trains at all times, but they stop in different places according to demand. We all got seats, and there were plenty of spares in the front car. By the time we made it to Camden it was fuller, but I think they opened up other cars at that point, too.

Almost every transit system has some sort of warning to indicate that the doors are about to close. Often it's a recorded announcement, but it's also likely to be some sort of buzzer. The PATCO cars we were on today had a mechanical bell that sounded like an old-fashioned telephone or a wind-up alarm clock. I felt like saying "hello" every time the doors closed, as if I were answering an imaginary phone. I doubt the kids I was traveling with would have gotten the joke, though. To them a phone "ringing" means a chirping electronic noise, or perhaps the music from their personalized ring tone. Phones haven't had bells any time in their lifetime.



Website image of a PATCO train

PATCO is elevated at Woodcrest, and it alternates between running at ground level and over viaducts through most of New Jersey. Most of the stops are in middle-class suburbs, and they're quite far apart—more like a commuter train than a subway. The kids gazed out the window for most of the trip. I could see their expression change when we left the suburbs and entered Camden. Not long ago Camden held the title of America's poorest city. It's been overtaken for that dubious "honor" **[though it has surpassed places like Detroit and East St. Louis for the nation's highest crime rate]**, but there's still little nice about the place. Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood (the area around Charm City Cakes) looked a bit on the skuzzy side, but it was immaculate compared with Camden. It's fascinating that New Jersey as a whole is one of the wealthiest places in America, but many of its urban areas are truly destitute.

PATCO enters the subway in Camden, but it surfaces again to cross the Delaware on the Ben Franklin Bridge. We tunneled underground just outside the historic district and rode on to 8th and Market in the heart of downtown Philly. The kids were intrigued to see what to me came across as a "real" subway station, the sort of thing you might see in New York or Boston or Chicago. Unlike the palatial (but extremely dark) stations in Washington, subway stations in Philadelphia are designed to be purely functional. This one was surprisingly clean and bright, but there was certainly nothing beautiful about the place. The PATCO cars are also strictly utilitarian, though they've been remodeled more recently than those on the Washington metro.



**In front of Independence Hall
Philadelphia**

We spent just a little over an hour in Philadelphia. Arriving in the afternoon, it was too late to tour the historic sites. Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell require timed tickets. They're free, but they sell out for the day early in the morning. We basically did a quick walking tour through the historic area. I was pleasantly surprised to see that Philadelphia was more open and tourist friendly than it was when I was last there. Back in 2004 they'd blocked off most of the historic area. We couldn't get anywhere close to the big sites without tickets to go inside. Now we could see inside the back of the pavilion where the Liberty Bell is housed, and we were able to take a group picture across the street from Independence Hall.

I saw one thing in Philly I don't think I'd ever seen before. Southwest of Independence Hall is Washington Square, a tree-filled urban space frequented by just a few too many homeless people. Thousands of colonial soldiers were buried in a mass grave here during the American Revolution. In 1952 they erected a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution on the site. It's an impressive monument, honestly more impressive than the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington. It's also both interesting and a bit creepy to think of this pleasant city park as a mass grave.



Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution

After a brief walking tour and a number of "photo ops" in downtown Philadelphia, it was clear the kids were ready to be on their way. While it is historic, Philly is far from the most exciting city in America. It's also a rather run-down place that doesn't come across as entirely safe. We made our way back to the subway, without so much as dropping a dime in the City of Brotherly Love.

We had a fairly long wait for an outbound PATCO train. In fact two westbound trains came and went before one showed up heading east. This train was fairly crowded, and our group mingled with a variety of ethnic riders who might best be described as "colorful". It was an entertaining ride, but everything went fine.

We drove about six miles north from Woodcrest. There was construction the whole way, but we made it through without too much problem. We exited at Mt. Laurel and entered a strange little bit of development that is sandwiched between I-295 and the New Jersey Turnpike. These superhighways are less than a half mile apart at this point, and there's a huge "hotel village" catering to traffic from both roads.

Our ultimate destination today was the Fairfield Inn—Mt. Laurel. This place received mixed reviews online, but it was easily the nicest of the places we stayed on this trip. It was older, but better kept than the Fairfield Inn we'd stayed at in Ohio. It also had a larger, more convenient parking lot (which was interesting in densely populated New Jersey), an enormous swimming pool, and a desk clerk who actually was able to efficiently process our gift card and check us in without a hitch.

The kids swam and relaxed in their rooms. I spent much of the late afternoon walking around the nearby area. Besides about a dozen hotels, there was an office park and a clinic of medical specialists sandwiched between the interstates. Much of the area is nicely landscaped, making it really quite a nice-looking—if strangely located—neighborhood.

Between the hotel and the clinic was an artificial pond with its own flock of ducks. The ducks had shed feathers all through the

area, practically covering the grass in brown and gray. I took a duck feather as a free souvenir, one of the stranger mementos I've collected in my travels.

For all the hotels, there was only one restaurant remotely nearby. **[A surprising number of hotel developments have that problem. It's surprising more restaurants don't locate in such areas.]** We had dinner tonight at that restaurant, which was part of the Bob Evans chain. I've been to Bob Evans before and not cared much for it, but dinner tonight was not too bad. It was certainly not healthy or low calorie, but it mostly tasted good. I had baked potato soup that probably should have been called cheddar cheese soup. There were chunks of potato floating in a cheese base, with lots of crumbled bacon mixed in. I also had a ham and cheese omelet that was good, if not terribly memorable. It came with hash browns that were the least enjoyable part of the meal. They were the same potatoes that were floating in the soup, but un-browned and with very little seasoning. Everyone else seemed to enjoy their dinners as well. Choices ranged from "homemade" chicken pot pie (the concept of homemade at a restaurant always amuses me) to lasagna to pork roast to an Asian salad.

After dinner I went to a nearby convenience store to try to find an ATM. One of the adult women said she needed some stamps, and she asked if I'd pick some up if they had any. The convenience store had two signs on it. One said "Kwik Farm" and the other "LUKOIL" (in all capitals). When I got back to the room, I looked up Lukoil on Google. It turns out they're a Russian company, the privatized version of the former Soviet state oil company. They

are one of the largest oil companies on earth, with operations on five different continents. Most of their oil comes from central Asia (all those -stan countries that used to be part of the USSR), where they still have a monopoly on production. In America they bought out the Getty company about a decade ago, and they're just now getting around to changing their station names to the Lukoil brand. Kwik Farm was the Getty brand of convenience store, but those farms are now under Russian ownership. I don't think I'd ever seen a Russian-owned company outside of Russia before.

Kwik Farm was one of those convenience stores that gouges you for everything. Their ATM had an automatic \$3.50 fee, and almost every product they sold was marked up about 50% higher than what it should cost. The lone exception was gas, which at \$2.49 was about the cheapest we saw on the trip. Unfortunately the suburbans were still nearly full from the fill in Arlington, so I couldn't take advantage of their one bargain. I did buy a coconut pie from Tastykake (strange, but good), a factory-sealed bottle of "fresh squeezed" lemonade, and a newspaper. None of them was cheap, but they weren't anything more than I'd expect to pay at Casey's. The worst deal by far was the stamps. They only sold them in multiples of four, so while the request was for two stamps, I had to buy four. What's more, four 44¢ stamps sold for \$3. That's 75¢ a stamp, or a mark-up of more than 70% over what the post office charges. Beggars can't be choosers, though, so I paid what they asked.

I spent the evening lounging around the hotel and got to sleep fairly early. I didn't sleep well, but at least I got a bit more rest than I'd had last night.

Monday, June 7

Mt. Laurel, N.J. to Howe, Indiana

The breakfast room was overwhelmed this morning, mostly with a bus load of French Canadian tourists. Because of that I limited myself to the classic continental breakfast, coffee and a roll. We got loaded up and were on our way by 7:30. We'd come in on I-295, but this morning I purposely chose the New Jersey Turnpike. I figured traffic would be better at rush hour on a weekday, both because it was toll and also because its exits are farther apart. That was definitely a good decision. We moved right along, and before we knew it we were nearly up to Trenton.



Website image of Steven Singer billboard

Just south of the historic site where Washington crossed the Delaware is the massive interchange of the New Jersey Turnpike and the Pennsylvania Turnpike. We turned west, paid one toll, and collected another ticket. We crossed the bridge and then hit by far the worst traffic jam of the trip in Philadelphia's northern suburbs. I-276 is six lanes wide, which makes it better than 90% of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. They need eight or ten lanes to accommodate the traffic here, though. We came to a dead stop and then just crept ahead for the next half hour or so.

We ended up stopped right next to a fascinating billboard. The billboard said in huge letters "I HATE STEVEN SINGER!" and at the bottom had the website address ihatestevensinger.com. We all pondered what this could mean, since it sounded like a bitter wife whose husband cheated on her or perhaps the victim of some criminal. One of the kids

had internet access on his phone (an interesting concept I can't imagine paying for myself), and he went to that site. It turns out to be the website for—of all things—a jewelry store. On their website they explain that men say “I hate Steven Singer,” but women LOVE the store. It's a strange gimmick, but I guess it did get our attention.

[These days no one bats an eye at using a cell phone for internet access. I even joined the smartphone age myself last Christmas. So far I've not used my phone to Google something so silly as “I hate Steven Singer”, but I have used it for directions and to check the hours of places I wanted to visit. Steven Singer, by the way, is still going strong, and they still use the same advertising campaign.]

It was stop and go throughout northern Philly, and I was very glad to exit onto I-476, which is officially called the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Like the “official” turnpike, this is one of America's oldest expressways, and it's not built at anything close to the standards you'd see on a modern highway. The entire highway is four narrow lanes with a concrete median in the middle. In many places there's no shoulder, and where there is one it tends to be very narrow. Fortunately traffic was fairly light, and we made our way north past Allentown without incident.

We exited at White Haven, which is officially the interchange for I-476 and I-80. It's a weird interchange, though, and after paying your toll you drive about half a mile on a town street before you get to the I-80 entrance ramp. **[A similar situation exists where I-70 and I-76 intersect in western Pennsylvania.]** We stopped in that no man's land between the interstates for our morning break. Our stop was at a Wawa convenience store. I chose it mostly because of its stupid name, but Wawa turned out to be quite a nice place. It was spacious and clean, and they had friendly, efficient employees. There's not much more I'd ask for in a gas station. A pleasant bonus was numerous flavors of fresh coffee. They had more than a dozen carafes set up in the rear of the store, and one employee's job seemed to be just dumping out coffee that was about to go stale and putting out fresh pots. I had a mixture of cinnamon and French roast, and it was excellent.

After our break we headed west on I-80. For anyone who may be headed to or from the East, this is the route to take. Unlike the Pennsylvania Turnpike (one of the worst roads in America) or the New York Thruway (which is clogged with traffic going to the dozens of second-rate cities in upstate New York), I-80 is a pleasure to drive. It basically goes nowhere between New York and Cleveland (the destinations are places like “Dubois” and “Clarion”), so there's not a lot of local traffic to slow things down. It's wonderfully scenic (crossing the Alleghenies), but it's a good quality modern road. Even with construction every thirty miles or so, we made our way across Pennsylvania in good time. **[I-80 in Pennsylvania is to my mind what every interstate should be. There's enough traffic and curves to keep you awake, but it's relaxing and fun to drive.]**

We stopped for lunch in Clearfield. Our science teacher and I went to a Burger King, while most of the kids patronized KFC. We finished before they did, and I filled some time by stopping in a Snappy's convenience store. Though not nearly so nice as Wawa, Snappy's did have an item I felt compelled to buy—35¢ ice cream bars. They were small (maybe half the normal size), but it made a nice little snack for not a lot of money.

We stopped for gas just inside Ohio. Mr. Ahlers (the science teacher) was driving the blue suburban on the leg after that, and he noticed that the charge meter was again getting lower. It wasn't in the danger zone yet, but he thought we should keep an eye on it. We did, and it just kept inching lower. We shut off the air conditioning, but that didn't seem to do anything. Eventually we decided to exit and see if we could find a place to have the problem checked out.

We exited the Ohio Turnpike at North Olmstead, which is just south of Cleveland. Mr. Ahlers asked the girl at the tollbooth about finding a repair place, and she gave vague directions that led us to a convenience store rather than a mechanic. He asked the customers there about getting it fixed, and they directed him a few exits north on I-280 to a strip they said would have a number of options. We found the strip all right, and it came down to a choice between the Sears auto center and a local chain called Conrad's. I'd have probably have chosen Sears myself, but Mr. Ahlers decided Conrad's was the place to go. It was just after 5pm when we pulled in there, and I wondered if they'd even be open.

Having dealt with them once, if I lived in Cleveland, I'd definitely go back to Conrad's. Given that my trust of repair shops is almost zero, that's high praise. Our problem with the suburban could have been a disaster, it turned out things really couldn't have gone better. Conrad's treated us fairly, and they got us in and out quickly. We had major service done, but we were back on the road within an hour. At home I've sometimes had to wait a week to get my car in for service. Here, though, it wasn't much more than what you'd spend at an oil change place. I was truly amazed at how fast they got everything done.



Conrad's Tire & Repair – North Olmstead, Ohio

It was no surprise to anyone that our problem was the alternator. By the time we stopped it was generating no power whatsoever. That had in turned caused us to completely drain the battery, to the point that they had to jump it just to get the suburban into the shop. They were able to diagnose the problem, get an alternator sent down from another location, install it, and also replace the battery—all in practically no time. They offered to just recharge the battery rather than replacing it, but it would most likely not be up to a full charge by the time we needed to leave.

The whole cost was right at \$400, which went on the school credit card. I've paid more than that for more suspicious repairs on my own car. I called my principal and superintendent to let them know of the situation and the unexpected expense. They were fine with charging it and just wanted to be sure we were all right. I couldn't help but think of all the things that could have gone worse with this. It was extremely fortunate that we noticed the problem right near Cleveland, a heavily populated area where it was easy to get the repair

done. I don't even want to think how it would have gone if the alternator went out in the middle of the woods in Pennsylvania. This nice suburban area also allowed the kids to shop and eat while we were waiting to get the car fixed. Many other places would not have been nearly so convenient.

When I was going over all the "what if" routines, I couldn't help but think of the times I'd driven the blue suburban last winter, on horrible roads and sub-zero temperatures. We could have been on our way to a regional tournament or a speech contest instead of nationals. If we had mechanical problems then, we'd have been stuck in the cold. While I'd rather have everything go smoothly, given what might have happened, our problems were really quite minor indeed.

We continued westward along the Ohio Turnpike. Most of the turnpike is now six lanes wide, so even though it moves a lot of traffic, things moved right along. Eventually we got to the Indiana border.

In Indiana we took our fourth toll ticket of the day, though we drove just a short distance west before exiting. Indiana recently privatized their toll road, leasing it to an Australian investment company. So far the Aussies seem to be maintaining it better than the state of Indiana ever did. It's a pleasantly smooth ribbon of asphalt that was just about the nicest road we took on this trip. Unfortunately the private company collects toll in an odd and awkward manner. They've laid off all the booth workers. Locals all have electronic "I-Zoom" tags on their cars that automatically charge toll every time they exit. Non-locals, though, go to lanes that say "SelfPay". To pay toll manually, you put your ticket into a vending machine. A read-out tells you the amount you owe, and you then can either scan a credit card or insert coins and bills to pay the fee. When you do, the gate rises to let you pass. This was a major problem when we exited. A pick-up two vehicles in front of us couldn't seem to figure out how the machine worked, and he spent more than five minutes before he finally managed to pay his toll. It is a cumbersome process, but I don't think it should take anyone that long.

Our destination tonight was the Super 8 in Howe, Indiana. Margaret and I stayed at this motel on our way to Toronto years ago. It's a very average Super 8, which means nothing very special. Unlike some of that chain, this one was reasonably priced, though. We paid right at \$200 total for four rooms and eleven people. You won't do better than that anywhere these days. **[Super 8 overall has become an absurdly expensive chain. Many of their properties are right at \$100 a night per room these days, with nothing that justifies that price. This one was very cheap by comparison.]**

We weren't entirely sure what time it was when we got to Howe. It was either 9:30 Eastern Time or 8:30 Central. We **think** Indiana uses Eastern **Standard** Time (the same as Central Daylight), but there were no clocks around to confirm that. I told the kids to pretend they were still on Eastern Time, so we could be on our way earlier in the morning. **[Since 2005 Indiana has used Daylight Savings Time, so actually we were correct in keeping the clocks as they were.]**

The kids had snacked in North Olmstead, but I hadn't eaten at all. There's not much of anything in Howe, so we headed north a mile to Sturgis, Michigan. As a side bonus, that gave the kids the opportunity to say they'd been to the Wolverine State. Most of the group ate at Taco Bell. When we entered the only other people in there were police officers. We got our food, and soon after we saw an elderly Hispanic woman sit down at a nearby table. I honestly thought she was homeless. She was wrapped up in numerous coats and blankets, and she just sat there looking a bit dazed. It turned out, however, that her family (three more generations, I think) were ordering at the counter. They came back with tray after tray of food and joined grandma in stuffing themselves. It was kind of weird to see real Mexican people eating fake Mexican food, but they seemed to enjoy it.

I wanted to use the internet back at the hotel, so I turned on my little laptop and attempted to connect with the Super 8's wireless. Unfortunately it gave me an error, saying I needed to enter a "network key". Most hotels that require passwords have a card or something in the information book that tells you what you need to do. There was nothing of the sort here, though. I asked the jovial south Asian man at the desk (who was pleased to tell me his family also owns hotels in Ankeny and Newton, Iowa). He wasn't the easiest person to communicate with, but eventually I figured out he was telling me the password was a string of ten 8's—that is "8888888888". It made me wonder if all Super 8's had the same password. I may try parking in the lot at one sometime and seeing if I can connect.

Tuesday, June 8

Howe, Indiana to Algona, Iowa

I was up early, and I was pleased that the kids were as well. They said they liked the Super 8 breakfast. I just poked at it myself, though. There were lots of different kinds of starch, but not much else. The kids liked that there were several kinds of cereal and they had the ubiquitous waffle bar that's in just about every hotel but the Econolodge in Arlington. I thought the coffee tasted burnt, the juice was watered down, and the rolls were frozen hard. It woke me up, though, and we were on our way about 7:00 Eastern Time.

We made our way across Indiana with no problem, and before long we were at the edge of Chicagoland. Many times before I've encountered horrible delays on I-80, either in Gary or at the one tollbooth where 80 joins the Tri-State Tollway just south of Chicago. We'd be hitting Chicago right at rush hour, and signs warned there was construction on 80, so I took a deep breath and expected the worst. This turned out, though, to be one of the easiest trips I've ever made through Chicagoland. It started out with paying our toll for the Indiana Toll Road. Just as in Howe we had to "self-pay" at a vending machine. In Gary, though, they had at least a dozen lanes open for self-pay, which meant we were able to just drive right up to a machine. The vast majority of traffic went through the electronic lanes, so the toll plaza really didn't slow things down at all. There was construction in Gary and Hammond, but they maintained six continuous lanes through the whole mess. The posted speed was 50mph, and traffic moved at almost exactly that. That honestly made it more relaxing

than urban interstates often are. The Illinois toll plaza also went smoothly. Virtually everyone using it now had I-pass, and they just sailed down the main lanes without stopping. Getting rid of all those electronic cars made the manual lanes flow much more smoothly. There were only about three cars in the lane I went to, and we were back on our way again in no time.

We stopped for gas in Minooka, which is just west of Joliet. Technically this is still in the Chicago metro area, but it has the feel of a small rural town. The place we stopped (a Marathon station) was something from another era. It was definitely more a gas station than a convenience store, and the place looked like it hadn't seen a mop or a dust rag since the '50s. Everyone used their restroom without complaining, though.

I filled the blue suburban with no problem, but when I scanned the school credit card to fill the black one, the read-out on the pump showed an error. I went inside and told the clerk there was a problem. She didn't really speak English, and I didn't know how to explain my problem in Chinese or Thai or whatever she actually did speak. Eventually she saw the credit card in my hand and said, "Oh, pump problem sometime." She ran it through by hand, and it was authorized with no problem. She then reset the pump, and I got the gas we needed.



A rainy "Welcome to Iowa" – I-280 in Davenport

nice little piece. It alternated between rain and mist as we made our way northwestward. We made one more stop, at the same Kwik Star in Janesville we'd stopped at on the way south. I love Kwik Trip coffee (or Kwik Star coffee, for that matter), and it was nice to have a good cup.

It finally stopped raining once we got past Mason City. We arrived at Garrigan a little after 4pm. Many of the kids had family there to pick them up, and there was quite a bit of celebration for our arrival. I couldn't celebrate too long myself, though. My college Statistics class would be starting at 5:45, and I had to be there to teach it by about 5:15. I rushed home to change and then rushed out to Iowa Lakes. It was an abrupt transition that showed me the trip was over and the routine of summer had to begin.

I'm not going to waste paper by adding a commentary section. Suffice to say this was an enjoyable trip, and it was good to see the kids really do well. While we were technically just in the middle of the pack, that's the middle of the top teams nationwide—which is something both the kids and I are genuinely proud of. There's a good chance we'll be headed back to nationals again next year (the juniors **really** want to go all four years in high school), and if we do I certainly hope we do at least as well again.

It always amazes me just how narrow Illinois is. It may not be Delaware, but by Midwestern standards it's not very far across. The Indiana border is Exit 161, and by the time we were in Minooka, it was less than two hours on to Iowa. It seemed like we'd just set off, and we were already crossing the Mississippi.

We stopped at the I-80 truck stop west of Davenport. This is supposedly the world's largest truck stop, though I've heard that claim elsewhere as well [**notably at the "mother of all truck stops" near Gallup, New Mexico**]. Inside the place is like a small shopping mall, complete with a food court. As always, the kids took far longer to eat than I did, so I killed a bit of time browsing through the shops. I actually ended up buying something, too—a sun catcher in a hot air balloon design. I love sun catchers (and pretty much any other stained glass, for that matter), and this was a