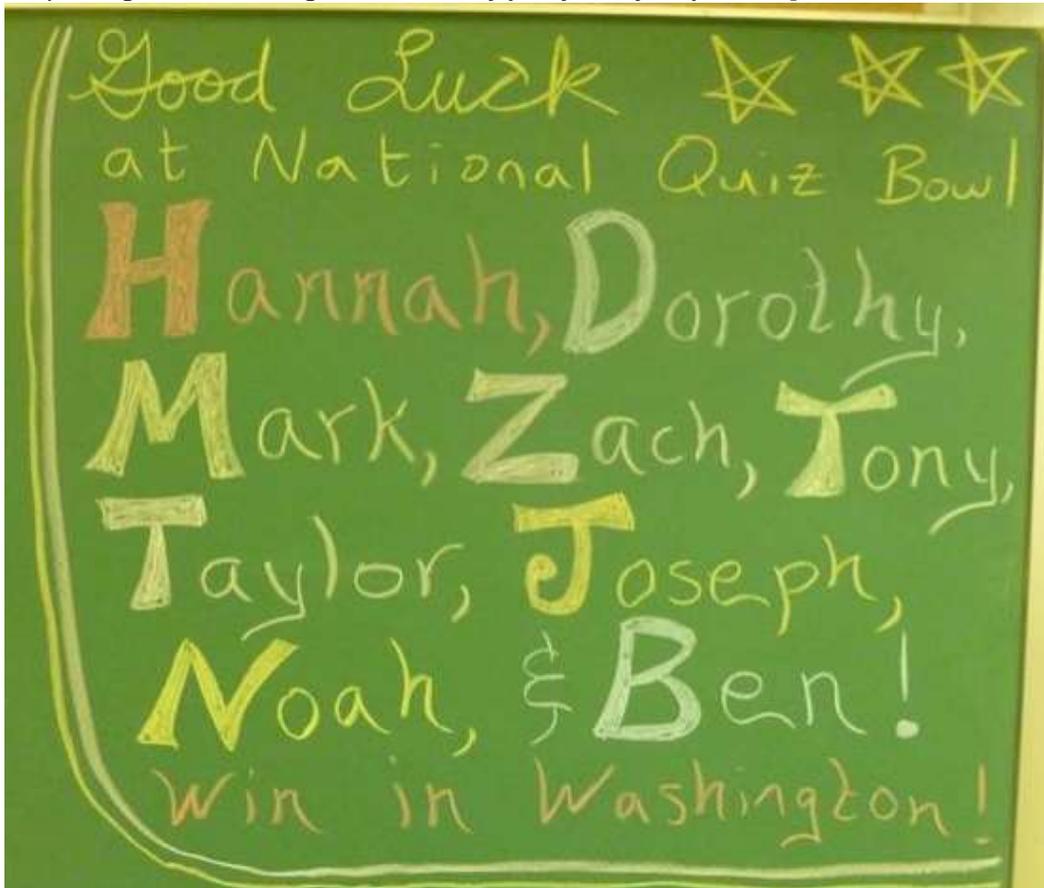


# Bittersweet Sixteen

## National Quiz Bowl in Washington – 2015

[UPDATE: January, 2021—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 may also add some additional photos to enhance the original travelogues. There's likely to be fewer new photos than in the past (or maybe even none), though, since the original was already pretty heavy on pictures.]



Good luck message on the chalkboard in Mr. Burrow's room

[I've put good luck messages on my board for all activities for as long as I've been at Garrigan. Ever since we first went to state basketball in 1993, I've put "special" messages like this one whenever kids participate in top-level activities.]

for a quiz bowl trip—nine students plus some additional entourage. While I've found that we often do better with smaller groups where everyone is truly there for the competition, there were a couple of reasons I opted to increase the size this year. First, it made it somewhat more affordable. We didn't have some of the donations we've had in past years to subsidize our trip, so the bulk of the money had to come from the kids' pockets. (In many cases it literally was the kids themselves—rather than their parents—who footed the bill; two paid me in cash from money they'd gotten as graduation gifts.) The tournament registration and hotel expenses are essentially fixed, particularly with rules set by the Sioux City Diocese that specify that seniors can't room with younger students (and, of course, girls and boys must also be separate) That means it's cheaper to fill each of the required rooms as much as possible. I also wanted to let some younger kids get experience at nationals, because in the future they will be the core of the team. The combination made for a very large group.

Four members of our team were veterans who have been at nationals for the past three or four years—though they'd never been quite so close to the core of the team. Our captain was Hannah Bernhard, who has long been our go-to player for literature and music questions. Hannah does an excellent job of processing other kids' answers in the bonus and lightning rounds **[one of the most**

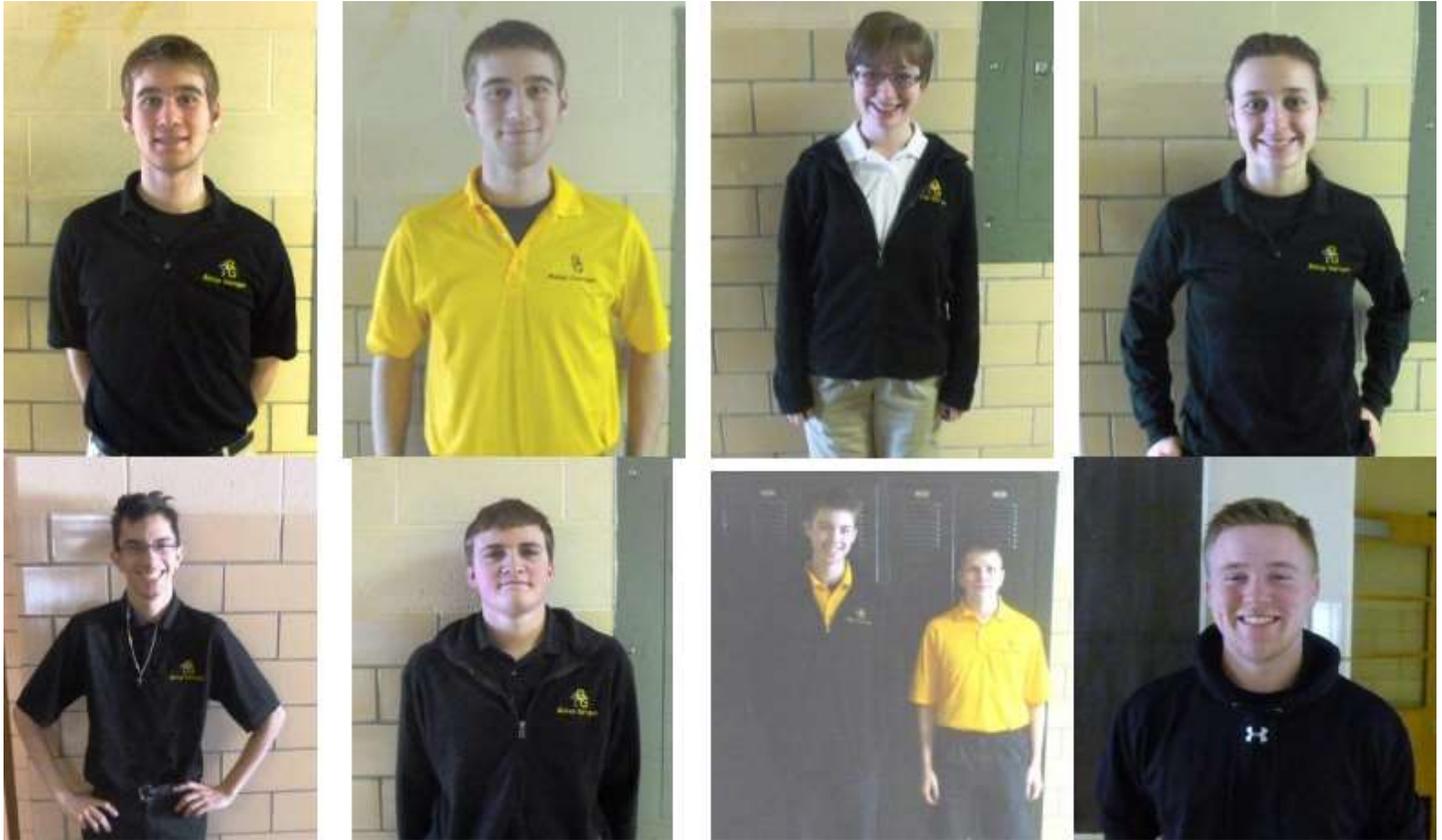
In the week since we returned from our sixteenth trip to the National Academic Championships, dozens of people have asked me how things went. That's a surprisingly difficult question to answer. The trip itself was really quite good. Our travel was uneventful and enjoyable. I saw some new things and revisited a few others that I haven't been to in years. The kids were generally well behaved and an easy group to travel with. So, from that perspective, this was a very good trip.

This trip had some unexpected expenses, though (more than on past trips), and those got absorbed by yours truly. More importantly, though, after making playoffs last year, we were winless at nationals in 2015. Some of our losses were routs, but others were extremely close, which made them all the more frustrating. It's that frustration that explains the title of this summer's quiz bowl travelogue.

Our traveling delegation this year would be one of the largest groups we've had

**important skills there is in quiz bowl]**, but she can sometimes be a bit shy on the buzzer when it comes to toss-up questions.

Also returning were the Kollasch twins, Zach and Tony. Their primary interest is in running (both won track and cross-country college scholarships), but they've taken all the "smart kid" classes our school offers. Their interests and knowledge are nearly identical, with history their strongest subject. In particular Tony knows almost as much about Presidents as my brother Steve did when he was a kid. I've always been horrible at telling twins apart. Fortunately, the Kollasches have been more laid back about that than some twins I've taught over the years. One thing that's helpful with them is that Zach almost always wears something orange (even if it's just his shoestrings), while Tony almost never does. They also have different glasses, but they might or might not be wearing those.



**Members of the 2015 national quiz bowl team**

The other returnee was Taylor Illg, who was in the middle of a year full of travel. In the winter he went on a mission trip to Haiti, and a week after we returned from Washington he'll be leaving for Spain. Taylor knows a lot of things about strange random topics, but he can sometimes be a bit hesitant to give answers.

In addition to those who had traveled to nationals before, two other seniors were making the trip. Dorothy Kirsch is one of Hannah's best friends, and Hannah was delighted to have her along as a companion during the trip. Dorothy is a very smart girl, but in quiz bowl the things she knows are almost identical to what Hannah knows.

Mark Fakler is a good friend of the Kollasches who is planning to be a music major in college. He is the younger brother of Michael Fakler, who was a key part of our team in the past. He's a very talented and creative person who has been to all-state repeatedly in both speech and music. Right after graduation Mark joined his father on a business trip that took them to Italy and Malta, and he'd share a number of anecdotes from that journey as we traveled. His other news was that his dad would be moving while we were away. For years his family has lived on an acreage northwest of Emmetsburg, but when he returned his new home would be a place he'd never seen before in the town of West Bend.

There were three younger players as well. Joseph Espinosa is a junior of Mexican descent who is originally from Albert Lea, Minnesota. While not our best player, Joseph was probably the most eager of all the kids making this trip. He was also a fun person to travel with.

Freshman Ben Degen is the younger brother of Devin Degen, who went to nationals with us the past two years. Devin chose to stay in Algona this summer so he could play baseball. Unfortunately, nearly constant rain meant he'd have just one game during the week we were gone. **[I think that's the third time we've had people skip nationals for baseball, only to sit around while we were gone.]** Ben seems to be as smart as Devin, but it was very clear he was less experienced. Ben seemed to spend most of the trip playing video games on his cell phone. **[It's weird to think that not only have Devin and Ben both graduated, but so has their younger sister Laurel.]**

Our final player was freshman Noah Buscher. I don't know Noah well, but I do know his family. His mother (Molly) and uncle (James White **[one of the first people I worked with in quiz bowl]**) were two of the students I've been closest to over the years, and I taught his dad (Cory) back in the '90s as well. Noah is proud to be a computer nerd, and he has a lot of interest in every branch of science. He was a good confident player, and he's likely to be our captain on a future trip to nationals. **[Noah's family moved to Nebraska before he finished high school. He didn't go into science, instead becoming a very successful professional photographer.]**

Our official delegation would also include Deb Kollasch and Dawn Bernhard, both of whom have chaperoned quiz bowl groups on multiple occasions. Both of their youngest kids graduated this year, so this is likely to be the last time they'll accompany us to nationals. **[I miss traveling with Deb and Dawn. They were both good chaperones and good companions.]** The final chaperon was Jake Rosenmeyer, a past quiz bowl captain who also went to New Orleans with us last year. Jake recently graduated from Briar Cliff University and was immediately hired to teach religion at Garrigan. I'm looking forward to having him as my co-worker. **[Jake is now at seminary, studying to become a priest. I miss having him on our teaching staff.]** There were also four unofficial members of our party. Noah Buscher's family (his parents, and younger brothers Aiden and Landen) drove out on their own as a family vacation. That made a total of seventeen, a very big group indeed.

## **Wednesday, May 27**

### **Alcona, Iowa to Springfield, Ohio**

I was up around 5:30 this morning and was showered, dressed, and had the car packed before 6am. I locked up my place and drove out to McDonalds, where I enjoyed a two for one deal on Egg McMuffins. Then I parked in back of the school and moved the two school vehicles (the black Suburban and gray Traverse) around to the drive by the parking lot. I was kind of surprised that the drive was clear. We've had construction going on at school all this past year, building a new gym as well as classroom and office space, and many times things have been blocked off by heavy machinery. **[That construction is done now, as is a lovely new chapel at the opposite end of the building.]** Fortunately everything was clear today.



**At Garrigan, just before leaving**

The kids were definitely not early in showing up, but they did arrive shortly before our designated 7:00 departure time. We had a large group this year, so I'd instructed the kids to pack light. Fortunately most of them did. There wasn't a lot of extra space in the vehicles, but we were able to get everything to fit.

At the last minute we changed our itinerary slightly. I'd originally planned to head east from Alcona, traveling down Avenue of the Saints. However, Molly Buscher texted me and asked if it would be possible for us to head south, so they could drop Noah off near where they live rather than bringing him all the way into Alcona. That was certainly no problem. While I think Avenue of the Saints makes for a more interesting drive than U.S. 20 **[which I think of as one of the dullest roads in America]**, the time and distance are pretty much the same on both routes. So we headed south from Alcona instead of east, and fifteen minutes later we stopped by the old church in the village of St. Joseph to pick up Noah. **[The St. Joe church is one of many in the diocese that is slated to be closed in the latest round of parish mergers. It's a lovely old building, and it's sad to see it close.]** The Buschers seemed surprised that we got there right when I said we would. With trips as long as these, though, I try to keep on schedule. **[I generally try to be on schedule in almost everything. One of the things that always annoyed me when I travelled with Margaret was that she had a much more casual sense of time than I do.]**

We drove south to Humboldt and Ft. Dodge and then east past Webster City and Iowa Falls. Mostly we passed bare fields. This has been a cold, wet spring. A lot of farmers weren't able to plant their crops at the normal time, and most of the crops that were planted hadn't managed to develop much. A few sprouts had just barely emerged, but none of the crops really looked as they should after Memorial Day.

Jake and I traded off driving the Traverse on the trip out to Washington, while the women drove the black Suburban. The senior boys were in the Traverse, while the girls and the younger boys were with the women. My preference is always to trade around the driving responsibilities to keep things from becoming too cliquy, but no one else seemed to want to do that.

Highway 20 in central Iowa is a fairly new four-lane road, and it completely avoids most of the towns. Most of the way there's nothing remotely near the highway. One of the few exceptions was our morning stop, a BP station whose address is Parkersburg (though in fact it's about five miles south of that town). While I'd noticed when they built the place a couple years ago, I'd never actually stopped there before. It's actually quite a nice little truck stop, and with large restrooms it made a good place to stop with a group. I'll definitely file it away for future trips. **[We have stopped there since, and I've stopped there on my own as well. About the only issue the place has is that it's among the most expensive places in Iowa for gas.]**

We continued on to Waterloo and then headed down I-380. Jake was driving at the time, and I pointed out to him that I'd known multiple people who had received tickets from the "photo enforced" speed zone in Cedar Rapids. I'd find out later that one of those unlucky

people was our chaperone Deb Kollasch. Being married to our county sheriff had little effect on a radar camera. I've wondered for years why the winding elevated highway in C.R. wasn't built to a higher standard. While it's newer than most other urban interstates, much of it still has a 50mph speed limit, though, and they're serious about it.

Around 11:00 we stopped at the Iowa 80 truck stop just west of the Quad Cities. We bought gas there and also had lunch in their enormous food court. Most of the kids went to either Taco Bell or Wendy's. There were long lines at both of those, though, so I looked to see where I could go through quickly. I ended up having lunch at Caribou Coffee. I didn't know they served "real" food, but it turned out to be a surprisingly good meal. I had a ham and gruyere sandwich on a pretzel bun that was both filling and tasty. I also got what was honestly some of the best coffee I've had anywhere. I don't think I've ever been to a Caribou outside of an airport before, but it's a place I might look for when I'm traveling.

The next leg was one of the shortest of the trip. I try to plan stops ahead of time, so in case the vehicles get separated we have a designated place to meet up. Usually I'll do long treks (like this morning's) followed by short ones. I normally try to schedule shorter runs after meals, because if I push too long someone is likely to need a restroom. This leg was actually less than an hour. We took the beltway around the Quad Cities and then headed south on I-74 toward Galesburg. Our stop was at a rest area right on the Spoon River. I don't think I'd ever stopped there before, but apparently the Bernhards make it a regular break when they head to their relatives in Tennessee. It's really quite a nice rest area, definitely a higher standard than what Illinois usually offers. **[Like many states, Illinois has closed many of its rest areas and upgraded the remaining ones in recent years.]**

The next leg was a long haul, taking us all the way across the state. This is also just about the dullest part of the trip. Away from the river banks, central Illinois is pancake flat, and the smattering of small cities (Peoria, Bloomington, and Champaign) do little to break up the monotony. What probably stood out most to me on this leg was passing Mitsubishi Motorway in Normal, Illinois. Last fall I replaced the old Chevy Metro I'd had since the '90s with a used but much nicer Mitsubishi Eclipse. While a "foreign" make, the Eclipse has a sticker on its window proudly proclaiming that it was made in Illinois. The factory is in Normal, and apparently they have their own exit on the freeway. **[Mitsubishi has since closed its plant in Illinois. The facility has been replaced by Rivian, a company that builds all-electric trucks and vans, and the street where the industrial park is located was renamed after the new employer. I've replaced the Eclipse with a Kia Optima, a Korean car that was also made in the U.S.A.—this time in Georgia.]**

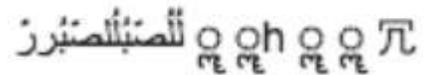
We stopped at the Indiana welcome center just past the state line. Unfortunately Indiana marks the start of Eastern Time, so we switched from mid- to late afternoon. There was quite a bit of road construction in Indiana, which meant we hit Indianapolis right at rush hour. Surprisingly, though, we whizzed around the Indy beltway barely slowing down at all. My tentative schedule had included a bit of padding for potential traffic problems, and we were well ahead of the predicted times when we stopped for dinner just east of the city.

Dinner was at a Wendy's in Mt. Comfort, Indiana, the place where I-70 switches from six to four lanes. I had my usual at Wendy's: chili with cheese, a side salad, and a small Frosty. That came to just over five bucks total, and it certainly satisfied my stomach. Most of the kids didn't get by quite so cheaply, though. Almost all of them bought multiple sandwiches and had bills more in the \$15 range. It amazes me just how much some kids can eat! **[I'm even more conscious of what I eat after being diagnosed with diabetes a year and a half ago. Even the small meal I had would have more carbs than I should eat, so these days I'd likely replace the frosty with unsweetened iced tea.]**

We quickly bought gas and then were on our way again. While we drove the kids entertained themselves by essentially killing each other's phones. While people perceive Apple products as being immune to viruses and bugs, apparently that's not the case. The kids were having fun with a prank that had gone "viral"—when a certain string of multilingual characters is received on an I-phone or I-pad, the gadget immediately stops what it is doing and re-boots. Since kids use their phones as much to play games as to communicate **[really more for the games]**, having them stop in the middle of the games is understandably annoying to them, and the kids were having great fun forwarding the text to one another and shutting down each other's phones at the worst possible times. Fortunately the text appears to do no long-term damage to I-phones. I'm sure our group is far from the only high school boys who got endless laughs from annoying each other with it. The whole thing made me glad to have a "dumb" phone. I don't think I can even receive texts in a non-western alphabet on my phone, and I've certainly never had a problem with it re-booting when I didn't want it to.

effective.

Power



Screen shot of I-phone "kill" text

**[The problem that caused the "Effective power" bug is the nature of the Arabic alphabet, in particular the fact that Arabic characters are rendered differently when they are at the start, middle, or end of a word. Apple set its devices to render a truncated version of the message as a notification. The text was designed so that the Arabic (which reads right to left and is a declension of the word for the aloe vera plant) comes at the end. Because of the unique nature of Arabic letters, the truncated version is actually longer when rendered than the original text. The device tries to shorten the longer version, which creates something longer still. It essentially goes into an infinite loop, with each truncation longer than the one before. The security system senses something is wrong, which forces the reboot.**

Since this trip, I've owned a couple of smartphones, though they were Motorola Androids rather than the extremely overpriced I-phones. I've never experienced anything like this issue. I did, however buy a new phone that kept re-booting when

**I first tried to start it up. It was a chore to get customer service to replace it, but once I did I got another of the same model that worked fine.]**

The most annoying thing about driving in Indiana is that they have a slower truck speed limit. The theory behind such laws is that at slower speeds trucks will have less momentum, and thus crashes involving them will be less serious. The problem is that when trucks drive slower than cars, the cars are forever having to pass the trucks. I rejoiced when Illinois finally did away with their dual speed limit a few years back, after it was proven that it actually caused more accidents. Unfortunately the law lives on in Indiana, which meant I drove most of my time in the Hoosier State in the left lane. **[I googled this while doing the revision, and apparently a couple years ago Indiana also joined the modern age and did away with the slower truck speed limits.]**

Once we reached Ohio the speed limit for everyone was 70mph, and much of the time I-70 was six-lanes wide. The exception was in the most congested part of Dayton, where there was some rather nasty construction. Not only did they reduce things to two lanes in each direction, but one of those lanes was actually the shoulder, which was very rough. We made it through all right, though, and we ended up getting to our hotel more than half an hour ahead of the time I'd put on our itinerary. It was interesting that the Buscher family (who had driven separately and not attempted to stay together with us) arrived just a few minutes before we did. They were unpacking when we pulled into the parking lot.

I'd made reservations at the Comfort Suites—Springfield, which is in a small city about halfway between Dayton and Columbus. We stayed at this exact same hotel two years ago, the last time we headed east for national quiz bowl. It was the cheapest place we stayed on this trip and easily provided the best value. The only real problem was that the place was undergoing renovations, which meant there were tarps and yellow tape all over the place. The rooms themselves were fine, but the public areas were a little lacking in ambience.

After we settled in most of the kids spent an hour or so in the pool. I noticed that the hotel's vending machines were severely overpriced, so I went to a nearby convenience store to pick up a couple treats. That was an interesting experience, and I was glad I was just making a small purchase with cash. They had signs posted all over the place explaining that due to a corporate computer upgrade at BP, they were temporarily unable to take credit cards. A woman at the store seemed oblivious to all those signs. She had filled an SUV and presented a Visa card to the clerk to pay the \$60 tab. (I must say it surprised me a bit that she was allowed to pump before paying in an urban area at night.) The clerk apologized that he couldn't take the card. She eventually went to an ATM that was in the convenience store and withdrew cash to pay for the gas. She suggested that the station should take care of the ATM fee. It would have been good of them to do so, but of course the night clerk didn't have the authority to take care of that.

I basically bought junk food at the BP station. The most interesting thing that I got was a pack of ding-dongs, those chocolate covered hockey pucks from Hostess. It's been literally decades since I'd had one, and they still have the same plastic taste I remember. I also got a bag of Bugles corn snacks and some Fanta orange pop. Even adding on the snacks, what I spent today was less than what the senior boys spent for one meal at Wendy's.

I munched my snacks as I did some work on my computer. It never fails that when I travel there are things that need to be done immediately with the school website. During the school year, when I have half a dozen students working on the site, I struggle to have enough things for them to do. Once I'm on my own, though, there's always something. **[This was true last spring as well. The pandemic shut down my usual computer class, but things still needed to be regularly updated on the website.]**

The website updates were one of the first workouts I gave to my new netbook computer. This is a newer and just slightly larger version of the one that got stolen three years ago when we were in Chicago for national quiz bowl. The school's insurance actually replaced the old one with a full-sized laptop, but I'd always found that to be annoyingly large for travel. Just this spring I finally broke down and bought another netbook. I'd purposely bought it with an outdated version of Windows (Windows 7) because I find that much easier to use than its replacement. A minor bonus was that I could install the web page program I prefer (FrontPage) for free. I'd purchased that program legally years ago, but the last couple of times I'd attempted to install it I was told the activation code had been used too many times. Apparently now the program is old enough that Microsoft has stopped caring how many times it has been installed. While by computer standards it might as well date to the stone age, I like FrontPage a lot better than its replacement (Expression Web), and it's much more user-friendly than "professional" products like Adobe Dream Weaver. It worked very well for what I had to do on this trip, so I was glad to have it installed on the netbook.

**[Later in the same summer I made this trip I updated the netbook with Windows 10, an operating system I like a lot. I used the netbook as my main computer, both at home and while traveling, for about five years. Then it mysteriously stopped working, I think the result of some virus I got while reading at a quiz bowl tournament down in the Des Moines area. I replaced it with an identical netbook (an Acer Aspire, again with Windows 10), which is what I'm using as I write this revision. Computer nerds hate netbooks, feeling nothing so cheap can be a "real" computer. They work great for my purposes, though—and they're WAY better than the other inexpensive option, a Chromebook.]**

We spent some time watching a show I'd never seen before, The Big Bang Theory. I knew this had a bit of a cult following among younger people **[and it was one of Jake's favorite shows]**, but I'd never watched it myself. I've certainly seen worse things on TV, but I don't know that I'd go out of my way to see it again. The humor just seemed dumb to me. I guess it's good to see what the fuss is about, though. **[Paul and Nancy watch this show a lot, and I think the only other time I've seen it is while visiting them.]**

# Thursday, May 28

## Springsfield, Ohio to Alexandria, Virginia

I was up around 6:30 this morning and enjoyed a leisurely soak under a hot, strong shower. I was less impressed with the Comfort Suites' breakfast, though. I think biscuits and gravy must be the cheapest possible hot item they can put on a breakfast buffet, because it seems that better than half of the places that boast "upgraded" breakfasts feature that item. I'm not a fan of sausage gravy under any circumstances, but I think what they served at the Comfort Suites would have turned off even obese Southerners. The biscuits were hard and cold, and the gravy looked like wallpaper paste with bugs in it. I'm also not a fan of do-it-yourself waffles, so I just had a cup of yogurt and a danish. I also had a bit of watered-down juice. My mood was not helped by the fact that the coffee dispenser was empty, and no one came by to refill it while I ate.

I'd scheduled a 7:30 departure, and we were on our way just slightly before that. We hit our second big city—Columbus—right at rush hour, and again we had a surprisingly easy time getting through. They were doing major construction on the southern beltway the last time we were in Columbus, and I think that we saw the result of that on this trip. There are now six continuous lanes the whole way, with other lanes added near the interchanges with major highways. Traffic moved at or above the speed limit the whole way. While Columbus is three times as large, it seemed notably less congested than Des Moines.

Our first stop of the day was at a rest area an hour or so east of Columbus. Of course we used the restroom, but I also made a bee-line for the vending machines. Having missed out on coffee at breakfast, I picked up some brew from a machine at the rest area. It was overpriced (\$1.75), but surprisingly decent. **[I've had coffee at a number of rest areas over the years, and it's almost always better than I expect.]**

For most of the rest of the day we were in the mountains. I rarely think of Ohio as mountainous, but the whole eastern half of the state is in the Appalachians. It's straight north of Kentucky and Tennessee, and it looks pretty much the same as those states. The Ohio DOT thinks Midwestern, though. I-70 runs arrow straight most of the way, even through severely undulating land. It's a real work of engineering. **[Whenever I take quiz bowl trips out east, I always love the drive through Ohio, West Virginia, southwest Pennsylvania, and the Maryland panhandle. I think it's one of the most beautiful places in America.]**

We took the beltway around Wheeling, West Virginia and made our way through one construction zone after another in the thirteen miles of that state's northern panhandle. Unlike in Ohio, the interstates in West Virginia are mountain roads. While they're built for speed, they wind and wind and climb and climb. It's like one big roller-coaster ride. They have creeper lanes for the trucks on all the up-grades. Unfortunately, those end right at the top, before the trucks are able to accelerate. That meant that time after time we had rather dangerous merges as the slow-moving trucks forced their way into the flow of traffic. Though thirteen miles isn't much, this was one of the most annoying stretches of the trip.

Our next stop was at a rest area just beyond the Pennsylvania border. This rest area had special reflectors installed all over the place with signs that said they changed color under icy conditions. I'd hate to drive in the mountains in winter. Straight roads in Iowa are bad enough when they're ice covered; I can't imagine what it would be like to maneuver along icy mountain roads.

We followed I-70 east to Washington, Pennsylvania, which is basically the south end of metro Pittsburgh. There was a lot of construction in Washington. The highway through there (where interstates 70 and 79 run together past malls and industrial parks) has needed six-laning for decades, and they're finally getting around to doing it. It was a mess to drive through, but hopefully in the benefit they gain will be similar to what we saw in Columbus.

We turned south on I-79 and headed back into West Virginia. Our next stop was at Westover, the "Coralville" of Morgantown, home of West Virginia University. Our first stop there was for gas. The Traverse could have made it all the way to D.C. without a fill, but I suspected the Suburban was running on fumes when we got to Morgantown. We pulled into a bfs (all lower case) convenience store. The name apparently stands for "Bruceton Farm Service", and the chain appears to be the Casey's of Appalachia. The price in West Virginia was \$2.69<sup>9</sup>, which was right in the middle of what we saw on this trip. The cheapest we saw was \$2.49<sup>9</sup>, and that was in Iowa—in spite of our state's raising the gas tax this past spring. We also saw prices as high as \$2.85<sup>9</sup> in Ohio. Even that was fifty cents cheaper than we paid last year, though, and more than a buck less than we've paid on some of the trips to nationals. **[It does amaze me just how much gas prices vary. It's currently \$2.19<sup>9</sup> in Algona, and apparently \$2.34<sup>9</sup> at that station in Morgantown where we stopped on this trip. That's more than double what it was at the height of the pandemic, but WAY down from a few years ago. Who knows what the future will bring?]**

While we were stopped for gas, the Traverse changed its appearance slightly. The women who had been following in the Suburban complained that it was difficult to distinguish the Traverse from other vehicles on the road. I certainly couldn't argue with that. I'd estimate that between half and two-thirds of the passenger vehicles we saw on the interstate were either SUVs or minivans, and gray or silver were by far the most common colors. The Traverse would blend right in. To make it more visible, Deb and Dawn tied a couple of plastic shopping bags to the antenna at the back of the roof. While the bags quickly became shredded, they essentially made a big white pom-pom that made our vehicle stand out from the sea of silver traffic.



**“Flag” on the back of the Chevy Traverse their menu. They’ve also changed from a “dollar” menu to a “value” menu with prices (usually more than a buck) that vary by location. For the most part the chain still offers good value, though.]**

Surprisingly the clerk didn’t ask if I wanted a drink with my meal. I didn’t, but normally that’s a question they ask. Had I chosen even a small cup of pop, it would have added another two bucks to the menu—pretty much all of which would have been pure profit for the restaurant.

I was more conscious of cost than I sometimes am on these trips because now that I’m making a car payment for the first time in more than a decade, finances have been fairly lean. I’m getting by fine, but it’s not like I have money to burn. What extra cash I have gotten (like mileage for driving to teach classes at remote community college centers) went to buy the new computer. Pretty much all the money I’d brought along for this trip was in the form of \$1 bills. I’d read that putting aside every \$1 bill you come across is one of the easiest ways to save. It’s true. Indeed it amazes me just how fast the singletons add up. I’d paid pretty much all my expenses (except hotel) in ones on a trip to Chicago back at Thanksgiving, and I did it again on two short trips up to Minnesota this spring. I had about \$100 in ones with me now, and while I knew that wouldn’t cover every expense on this trip, I hoped it would pay a lot of them. **[I continue to save all the ones I come across, and it really is a painless way to build up a bit of a cushion.]**

Just as we were leaving Morgantown, the Buscher family showed up at the same Taco Bell. They’d left the hotel well after we did, but I’m pretty sure they didn’t strictly obey the speed limits—something I always do in school vehicles **[and generally in my own car as well]**.



**Wikipedia picture of Sideling Hill Cut on I-68 in Maryland**

through Hagerstown and on to Frederick, where we turned south on I-270 toward Washington, D.C.

Jake was driving during the next leg, but I’d have been perfectly willing to continue at the wheel myself. That’s because the route we followed was one of my favorite highways anywhere. Interstate 68 is signed as the “National Freeway”. It follows the route of the old National Road (U.S. 40) through the Allegheny Mountains in West Virginia and the Maryland panhandle. It’s easy driving (except for a single urban stretch in Cumberland), and it’s one of the most gorgeous roads I’ve ever been on. I’ve traveled I-68 enough times that it’s almost familiar, but I’m still amazed at just how rugged the landscape is less than a hundred miles from the coast. It’s amazing that our ancestors ever made their way west.

We drove east a couple hours and made our last stop before Washington. This was at the Sideling Hill Rest Area, which affords gorgeous views of the surrounding mountains. Just east of the rest area we re-joined Interstate 70, which follows a more northerly route through the mountains via the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I took the wheel again, and we followed I-70 east

All day long our driving was relatively easy, with the only real difficulty being trucks merging at the end of the creeper lanes. The D.C. metro area essentially begins at Frederick, and the half hour between there and the Capital Beltway was also uneventful. When we got to the interchange of I-270 and the beltway, though, I had horrible memories from earlier trips. The beltway was a solid wall of traffic, and we pretty much had to force our way onto it. Once we did, it took about fifteen minutes to crawl ahead just four miles to our exit. I’ve noticed before that Washington has an amazingly early rush hour, and even at mid-afternoon the freeways were packed. We left the

traffic and followed the George Washington Parkway along the Virginia side of the Potomac, past the CIA complex. The speed limit on this scenic drive is mostly 45mph, but I definitely made better time there than on the beltway. Near Arlington Cemetery we joined another sea of traffic on I-395. We crawled again for the last five miles of the trip, finally exiting at Seminary Road in Alexandria.

Approaching our hotel from the freeway was a bit odd. While the Mark Center complex where the hotel is located is adjacent to I-395, it's not particularly easy for westbound traffic to get there. We had to go north two blocks on Seminary Road, cut across four lanes of traffic, turn left on Beauregard Street, go west one block, and then turn left again on a road that essentially circles the hotel. That same road intersects Seminary, but it's impossible to come off the freeway and turn onto it. I was definitely glad to have checked out the area with online maps ahead of time.

The entrance to the Hilton—Mark Center is designed for valet parking, but I knew they had self-parking available there as well. There were no signs for it, but I asked one of the valets where to go. He was surprisingly polite (particularly since he'd be missing out on a tip with self-parking), and he directed me to basically loop around to the back of the hotel where the ramp was. The ramp is interesting because it's built into a hill. We entered on the top level exposed to the elements, and later we'd exit four levels down from there.

We arrived at the Hilton—Mark Center around 4:30, but then it took forever to check in. Part of the problem was that the desk clerk was from somewhere in Eastern Europe and had a native language that definitely wasn't English. More important, though, was an issue we'd encountered before with Hilton's reservation system. I had made reservations for five rooms months ago, using the school credit card as the guarantee. The system wouldn't let me complete the reservation without listing the people who would be occupying each room. Once I did, it removed my name from the reservations and replaced them with the first name I'd listed as an occupant. (It even had the room I'd be staying in in Jake's name.) One of the rooms was even in the name of a person who had since decided not to come on the trip and was replaced by someone else. I can understand having both my name and that of the occupants listed, but removing mine was just silly. Having one person pay for a block of hotel rooms is not at all uncommon, and the rooms should be easy to find under that person's name. Fortunately we'd encountered the same issue in New Orleans last year, so I was expecting it. I had all the documentation on my Kindle, and the clerk used that to locate all the reservations. He also processed four separate keys for each room, so everyone would have his own key—and in many cases there were spares as well.

A couple of things about this stay turned out better than I was expecting. Like most "better" hotels, the Hilton's base rate doesn't include much of anything extra. They charge for parking, breakfast, internet, and the like. Apparently the sponsors of the tournament had negotiated a bit of a deal, though. We got parking for about half the rate quoted on their website (\$14 a day per vehicle, which isn't bad for a major city), and they gave us a code we could use to get complimentary internet access. We also got a ton of coupons (four for each person in our party) that we could theoretically use to get a 15% discount at the restaurant. Nothing in that restaurant was cheap, though, so we never took advantage of those.



**Hilton—Mark Center**

The Hilton—Mark Center is a twenty-nine floor suburban tower of blue glass that stands out amid its mid-rise neighbors. I found it interesting that we were assigned to rooms on the thirteenth floor, since many hotels avoid using that floor number. Since we'd end up without a win, perhaps I should use that bad luck symbol as an excuse for our doing so poorly. Jake and I were in Room 1312, and next door there was even a Room 1313 that made me think of the address of the TV family *The Munsters*.

Mark Center itself is a '60s development that combines government and corporate offices and a major convention center. It is one of many "satellite centers" of business scattered throughout the D.C. suburbs. By far the biggest employer here is the Department of Defense, which has its largest facility outside the Pentagon at Mark Center. The Hilton is one of three hotels that serve visitors to the complex.

The most notable neighbor to the Hilton is an enormous apartment complex called Southern Towers that marches east from Seminary Road south of Beauregard. These are apparently mixed-income apartments, but they sure look like projects. The view from our room reminded me a lot of what the area near Comiskey Park looked like before they tore down the projects in Chicago. The towers seemed to have more than their share of questionable people, too. Some of the kids described the 7—Eleven across the street as "sketchy", and I can't argue with that observation. It was kind of an odd location for a nice hotel.

We got settled, and then the group all assembled in my room for a brief meeting. The main thing I did there was to hand out SmarTrip cards for use on Washington area transit. This was a big change from our previous trips to D.C., and it turned out to be a headache for many reasons. Like many major cities, Washington is changing the fare collection on its trains and buses. The SmarTrip cards are plastic cards the size of a credit card with a computer chip embedded inside them. They're essentially the same thing as the Ventra cards in Minneapolis or the GoTo cards in Minneapolis. These cards existed the last two times I was in Washington, but tourists still mostly used paper fare cards with a magnetic stripe that could be loaded with short-term passes. No passes are available on paper these days, though, and there's a \$1 surcharge each time you use a paper farecard to take a trip on the Metro. I'd bought SmarTrip cards for everyone in our group well before the trip started. Those cost \$10 and came with \$8 in stored value that could be used to pay for bus or train rides. I'd then attempted to add the same week-long rail passes Margaret and I had used when we visited D.C. a few years ago at Christmas. This was easier said than done, though. Each card had to have its pass added individually, and there was a limit to both

the number and value of credit card transactions they would process in a day. Then, only after I'd bought passes for about half the cards, did I find out that hidden deep in the fine print was a rule that said that the passes needed to be activated by being touched to a card reader within thirty days of purchase. I spent forever playing both e-mail and phone tag with customer service people before eventually getting them to re-issue the passes so they'd be valid when we were actually in Washington. We'd then find while traveling that four of the cards didn't actually have passes added to them, and two others had the wrong kind of passes (actually a better pass than the one I'd ordered). The credit card wasn't actually charged for the passes that weren't issued (which I think may have been some of the first ones I tried to do, before I realized they had the daily credit card limit), and they just charged the price of the cheaper passes for the ones that had been credited with the wrong pass. I only found that out after I returned home, though, and I'd spend much of this trip dealing with problem after problem we encountered trying to use the cards, several of which were not programmed as I'd intended. If I were to do this again, I'd wait until we got to Washington to bother with getting the cards. We'd just budget time to get what we needed from the vending machines at a station. I was trying to plan ahead, though, and that ended up being a bad mistake.



**SmarTrip card**

**[In general I prefer to plan things ahead of time when I travel, including such details as buying transit passes. There are some cities (like Chicago) where that's extremely easy to do. Many others, though, make paying for transit WAY more difficult than it needs to be.]**

We were staying at the Hilton—Mark Center because that was where the tournament was taking place. This is definitely not a hotel I'd recommend to people who are just visiting the Washington area, though. Not only is it expensive and awkward to get to, but it's also not even remotely close to any metro station. The hotel theoretically offers a free shuttle that will take you to the station at National Airport, but with a group our size that wasn't really a practical option. The only viable choice for us was to take a city bus and then transfer to the train.

Mark Center has its own "transit station" (a collection of five bus stops sheltered by the overhang of an office building) just south of the Hilton, and thousands of commuters use it daily. On weekdays it actually provides a pretty good connection. Bus 7-M runs express between Mark Center and the Pentagon every ten minutes throughout the business day, and a couple of other buses make just one or two stops over the same route. The options dwindle at night or on weekends, though. At off hours the best option is bus 7-A, which winds through residential Alexandria, taking three times as long as the express bus to reach the Pentagon.

In most cities the bus and train systems are integrated, so one fare covers an entire trip. That's not the case in Washington, though. **[This is mostly because the D.C. area covers numerous cities in two states and the federal district. It's almost impossible for any one system to account for all those different jurisdictions.]** Our passes worked only on the metro, which meant each time we took the bus, we either had to use the stored value on our SmarTrip cards or pay in cash. Bus fare is \$1.75. There's supposed to be a discount when you transfer between buses and trains, but apparently that doesn't apply when you're using a pass for the metro. We paid \$3.50 for each round trip we took on the bus, and that added up fast.

We walked over to the transit station and found the stop for bus 7-M easily. Between our group and the commuters, the bus was nearly full when we left Mark Center, but everybody got a seat. We whizzed down the express lanes of I-395 and soon arrived at the Pentagon. There's a huge busway there, with an easy connection to the Pentagon metro station. We made our way down to the subway and found the platform for outbound trains. Trains were running frequently, but all of them were packed ridiculously full. It looked like the pictures you see from Asia, where they have special pushers to cram people into the subway cars. **[The D.C. Metro does seem to be busier than the train systems in most other American cities. They'd do well to run even more frequent trains, like New York does.]**

We waited until two full trains had passed. Eventually we made our way to a somewhat less occupied part of the platform and managed to force our way into an already crowded car on the third train. Fortunately we were only headed one stop south, so it wasn't hard to remember where we needed to get off. I carefully counted once when we got off, and indeed all our group was on the platform.

My goal tonight was mostly to show the kids how transit works in Washington. It's actually more complicated than in many cities, mostly because you have to tap your card both when entering and when exiting a station. Without a pass, fares are based on distance, and that double-tap is how they figure out how far you've traveled. They probably do take in a little more fare with that system, but it causes horrible congestion at the exits. There's a reason they don't use that method in New York or Chicago.

Our destination was Pentagon City Mall (technically the Fashion Centre at Pentagon City, with the pretentious British spelling of "Centre"), a multi-floor temple of retail that I knew from past experience was easy to get to by metro. While it is convenient, there are two issues with Pentagon City. First, it's one of the most expensive shopping centers in America. For no reason I can figure out, the chain restaurants in the food court charge half again as much as comparable places elsewhere in the D.C. area—sometimes double what you'd pay in the Midwest. Pentagon City is also one of the noisiest places I've ever been to. The mall is centered on a glass and metal atrium,

which seems to reverberate every sound. The place is constantly packed with tourists (including us, of course), and the constant din is annoying to say the least. I gave the kids the choice of how long they wanted to stay, and they suggested two hours. That was about an hour and a half longer than my eardrums could stand.

I was originally planning to have dinner at Panera, but the line there was ridiculous. I ended up going to Popeye's chicken. I ordered a combo meal that I'd eaten in the Twin Cities back at Easter. In St. Paul it cost \$4.99, but at Pentagon City they wanted \$9.49 for the same thing. With tax I parted with eleven of those dollar bills in my pocket.

To escape the noise I left the mall and walked around outside for a while. Pentagon City is one of those "transit-oriented developments" that urban planners rave about. It's full of brick apartment buildings with chain restaurants and "big box" stores on their lower floors. The critical flaw of the area, though, is that it's not very friendly to pedestrians. The streets aren't especially busy, but they've designed them to limit where you can go on foot. If you want to go straight across the street from the mall, for instance, you have to walk a full block north, cross, and then walk back a full block south. It started raining when I was outside, and I couldn't help but think that it would have been much more convenient if they'd allow pedestrians to walk through the parking ramp for the mall. That wasn't an option, though.

Around 7:30 Deb and I took about half of the kids over to a supermarket that was located across the street from the mall. Deb had gotten a contribution that was supposedly to go for food for the group, particularly since breakfast was not included at the Hilton. The store we went to was Harris—Teeter, a very upscale chain owned by Kroger. It certainly fit right in amid all the pretentious condos that make up Pentagon City. Deb gave the kids free reign to pick up what they wanted, and it's not surprising that there were few bargains among their selections. I was appalled that the store would even have orange juice for sale at \$5.49 for a three-quart bottle—let alone that kids would actually buy it. They also picked up name-brand pop-tarts and items I really don't think of as breakfast food, like beef jerky. The donation was fairly hefty, though, and when things were finally totaled at the register, there was actually quite a bit of money left over. The kids toted bag after bag of food back to the mall, and they'd have plenty of food to keep them going the mornings we were in Alexandria.

We made our way back to the mall entrance, where we'd planned to meet up with the rest of the group. That was easier said than done, though, because there was an enormous sea of middle school kids in bright T-shirts who were obviously on a field trip. The others had gone outdoors to escape the mob, and we found them there.

The metro was much less crowded, and we made it back to the Pentagon without a problem. Bus 7-M had stopped running for the night, but after a short wait we were able to catch bus 7-A instead. That bus runs express for only two miles, before exiting the freeway at Shirlington, a neighborhood on the border of Arlington and Alexandria. The rest of the trip wound through a residential area that seemed to have no through streets. It looks like a pleasant neighborhood, but it's definitely not designed for bus service. The narrow, winding streets barely have enough room for two cars to pass. There are speed "humps" (oversized speed bumps) that badly jolted the bus as we moved around. There were also some steep hills that made the bus struggle to ascend. It's good that they serve the residential area, but it seemed like an endless ride when we were headed beyond it.

Bus 7-A makes several stops in the vicinity of the hotel. We got off at Southern Towers and crossed the street, but we could have stayed on about five more minutes and gone back to the Mark Center transit station. Once we got settled back in our rooms, I walked back over to the 7-Eleven at Southern Towers. That took longer than it might have, because while I was trying to head back several fire trucks were heading to a fire in one of the apartments. There were actually three different fires at Southern Towers in the four days we were in Alexandria, which made me wonder just how common they are.

I spent much of the evening talking with Jake, who is truly excited about joining the Garrigan staff. I like my job, but it's been quite a while since I've had the enthusiasm he does. That's a good thing, though, and hopefully some of it will rub off on us old-timers.

At 11pm we watched the local news. Something I've never really understood is why the TV schedule is so late in the Eastern and Pacific time zones. Presumably those who live there think everything is too early in the middle of the country. It's not like people on the coasts seem to start their day particularly later than others, though, so if they're staying up to watch the news, their nights must be shorter.

It was kind of strange to see a familiar face on the sports report.: shortstop J.J. Hardy. Hardy was drafted by the Brewers at the same time as my former student Brad Nelson. The two of them were good friends and roommates at spring training. I met Hardy on several occasions while seeing Brad play in minor leagues, and he was the best man at Brad's wedding. I knew Hardy had been traded from Milwaukee to the Twins, but he sort of disappeared from the radar after that. He has apparently been playing with the Baltimore Orioles for five years now, taking Cal Ripken's old job. No Midwestern TV station ever pays any attention to the Orioles, but they're essentially a home team in the D.C. area. I'd see Hardy on the news every night on this trip, which was really kind of weird. He's a really nice guy, though (which, if you've read these travelogues before, you know is not something I'd say about every ballplayer), and I hope his career continues to go well.

Once the news was over I turned off the TV. Jake watched a movie on his I-pad for a while, but eventually he called it a night as well.

# Friday, May 29

## Washington, D.C. area

I woke up early, but surprisingly well rested. Last year when we were in New Orleans Jake almost always was up before I was. This year, however, I'd beat him out of bed almost every day. I enjoyed a good hot shower, and then went online to try to add cash value to the metro cards, since I knew we'd need more than the \$8 that was on them for the bus. I was only able to add value to four of the cards, because of yet another of their rules about online transactions. That actually turned out to be a good thing, given all the other problems we'd have with the cards as the trip went on.



Our group in the lobby of the Hilton—Mark Center

We met down in the lobby about 8:45. I'd made up a sheet that detailed the tournament rules, particularly all the quirks that make nationals different than the tournaments we go to around our own area. Few of the kids seemed very interested in that, though. **[Whether or not they do care has come to be a pretty good indicator of how serious they are and how we'll do overall.]** They chatted with each other and played video games on their phones. The competition didn't really seem to be the high on anyone's agenda.

That definitely showed in our first game. At 9:30 we played Harrison High School from West Lafayette, Indiana. While I don't think we'd actually played them before, Harrison is a perennial competitor at nationals. This year they'd come on a bus, and they had teams competing at all the different levels—varsity, JV, and middle school. Their varsity team absolutely crushed us. While there were a couple of questions we could have argued about, it wouldn't have made any difference in the great scheme of things. In the end Harrison beat us 350 – 120.

I visited with Buschers for a while after our first game. I hadn't really talked with Molly and Cory at any length since they graduated from high school two decades ago, and it was kind of good to get caught up again. Then I killed some time back in the room.

Our second game today at 11am was vs. Palisade High School from Colorado. The kids on Palisade's team seemed nice enough. Indeed, they were among my favorite of the teams we played. They wore T-shirts proclaiming that they were the Colorado state academic champions. There is no similar event in Iowa, and I can't say I'm terribly upset about that. While we'd probably do all right in a statewide competition, it's unlikely we'd ever win. Quiz bowl is never classed, and big schools like Ames and Ankeny Centennial would dominate a statewide tournament in Iowa.

**[Since this was first written an organization called the Iowa Quiz Bowl League was created, and they do have what they call a state tournament. Both the organization and that tournament are mostly intended for big schools from the metro area, though. Officially there's a "small school" division, but it's typically dominated by schools like Central Campus, the school for the gifted in downtown Des Moines.]**

While their team portrayed themselves as small-town boys, Palisade is really a suburb of Grand Junction. The school is about eight times the size of Garrigan, so it certainly stands to reason that they'd have a very strong team. Our kids still seemed half asleep, which meant this was another sound defeat.

It certainly didn't help that we had one of the worst readers I've ever seen at nationals. He stumbled a couple of times, and—more importantly—he wasn't familiar with the current rules. He disqualified our captain when she gave an answer before being recognized. There used to be a rule to that effect at nationals, but they changed that about four years ago. While you're still supposed to wait to be recognized, it clearly says there is no penalty now if you don't. I argued the point, and while I won, I think I made an enemy of the reader. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, as we ended up losing 255 – 100.

As I always do when I travel, I'd scoped out the neighborhood ahead of time online. **[As I write this revision, I'm planning a trip to Texas, and I've scoped out online maps to prepare for that.]** The Department of Defense had a document on their website detailing all the restaurants within what they considered walking distance of Mark Center. Interestingly, many of those were more than a mile from the hotel. While I walk that far all the time, not a lot of people do. The closest place outside Mark Center itself (where the choices were expensive hotel restaurants or the DoD cafeteria) was what they listed as "minimall #1" on their map. It was about half a mile from the hotel, and our team (like just about every other group at the tournament) walked there for lunch. Minimall #1 featured old stand-bys like McDonalds, Subway, and Dairy Queen, and the bulk of our group chose to eat at one of those three. I was slightly more adventurous. I joined a couple of the seniors at Noodles, the place that features pasta dishes from around the world. For lunch I had their daily special, which was called "Thai hot pot", which was basically a curry that had been thinned down to a soup. Interestingly one of the kids had a Japanese dish that was almost identical to mine, except that it had less broth and was cheaper. I didn't really care for the extra broth in mine and wished I'd chosen the other dish.

After eating I walked over to a CVS pharmacy in the minimall and bought a couple of things. This CVS had only self-checkout, though there was a rather bored looking clerk whose only job seemed to be overseeing the registers. I ran into a problem because I was carrying a spiral notebook that I'd rescued from the trash on the last day of school. I used that notebook to give scratch paper to the kids and to write down answers and scores during our games. The problem at CVS was that the scanner apparently noticed that the notebook had a bar code on it and attempted to read it as if I were purchasing it. The notebook was clearly used, with a semester's worth of some kid's doodles on the cover. The scanner didn't know that, though, and it tried to look up a price. Fortunately, this was not an item CVS sold, so I wasn't actually charged for it. It did freeze the machine, though, bringing up a "wait for assistance" flag on the screen. I gather from the clerk's reaction that things like this happen all the time—which is probably why they need to pay a clerk to do nothing but oversee self-checkout. **[Self-checkout is one of those things that seems like a good thing in theory, but rarely works well in practice.]**

Back at the hotel I did more work on the school website. Today I needed to upload the weekly bulletin from St. Michael's Church in Whittemore. Normally I just upload the bulletins without really even thinking, but today for some reason I actually looked through the thing. Whoever put it together chose a really unfortunate and difficult to read script font. That stood out because the bulletin noted that this Sunday was Holy Trinity. The font was so unclear, though, that the second word looked more like "Family" than "Trinity". I actually wondered whether they'd goofed up and sent me the wrong bulletin, since Holy Family is the week after Christmas. It was a summer bulletin, though, and when I looked closer the word in question did indeed refer to the Three in One. I sometimes have fun with fonts myself (as you can tell from the daily headers in these travelogues). Hopefully this will be a lesson that they should be at least minimally legible.

Our afternoon game was against a team that was appearing at nationals for the first time. They were from Soap Lake, a small town in central Washington vaguely near Yakima. Of the schools we played, they were the most like us, and this would be one of our closest games. If the kids had been more into the competition, we'd probably have won this game. Instead we were probably their only win of the tournament.

One of the mothers who was chaperoning complained that the kids from Soap Lake were conferring during toss-up questions, something that is strictly against the rules. They did—more than once—but unfortunately it wouldn't have made a difference in the outcome. The questions they conferred on were ones neither they nor we got right. We ended up losing the game 175 – 145.

I gave the kids just a few minutes to change into more casual clothes, and then we headed back to the bus stop. We caught bus 7M to the Pentagon, and on the way there our group was seated near a guy in military fatigues. He happened to notice that one of our kids was wearing an Iowa state track meet T-shirt and asked about it. It turned out the guy was an Army officer stationed at the Pentagon who was originally from Strawberry Point, Iowa (a place I'd applied for a job at the same time I interviewed at Garrigan years ago). Like several of our kids, the man's younger sister had run at state a week ago. I guess it really is a small world.

We transferred to the metro but had a bit of a delay when we got off at Smithsonian station. That was when we discovered that some of the cards didn't have passes encoded on them. I spent quite a while arguing first with the station manager and then on the phone with a customer service agent, trying to get the matter resolved. Neither could seem to do anything, and with the weekend coming, there wouldn't be any other opportunity to resolve the issue. We found out that no passes had been encoded on some of the cards. Such passes could only be added online, so we couldn't do it now, either by phone or at the station vending machines. That meant our only option was to pay for the metro rides one at a time. That's not cheap in Washington, so this became an unexpectedly large expense. **[It really is stupid that you can't buy the passes at a vending machine. I have no clue why they don't allow that.]**



**At the World War II Memorial**

found out that the National Park Service chose to remove the quote because it was extremely controversial with African-Americans. While the words were King's, they were apparently shortened and taken out of context. Poet Maya Angelou said, "it makes this modest man seem like an arrogant twit." The quotation was removed shortly before the 50th anniversary of the famous March on Washington. There have been many suggestions for replacing the message (the simplest would simply be to alter the first person phrasing to say "He was a drum major..."), but it now looks like structural problems with the rock will keep it from being re-engraved.

The forecast pretty much every day we were in Washington was for rain. We'd left rain in Iowa, and it poured most of the time we were gone. The front apparently stalled in the Appalachians, though, because we ended up with clear (though hot and humid) weather the whole time. We took advantage of that today by taking a long walk to all the various monuments. I'd seen all these multiple times, and it was the second time for many of the kids as well. They're still interesting to re-visit, though, and we had fun walking around to the Jefferson, FDR, Martin Luther King, Korean War, Lincoln, Vietnam War, and World War II memorials.

Something the kids noticed was a change at the Martin Luther King Memorial. When we were here the last time one of our players at the time (Jake Hamilton) had posed by a quotation at that memorial that read, "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness." He was our band's drum major at the time, so it was an appropriate place for a picture. The kids noticed today that the quotation was not there. They immediately got out their smartphones and started searching the internet to find out why. We

After walking about six miles we made our way back to the metro and caught a train over to McPherson Square. The train we caught was part of the silver line, a new metro line that was added since the last time I was in Washington. For the vast majority of its length the silver line runs on the same tracks as the pre-existing orange and blue lines. At the west end it diverges, though, to head to distant suburbs in Virginia. It now ends at Tyson's Corner, which is beyond the beltway northwest of Washington. In a couple years it will be extended out to Dulles Airport, twenty-six miles west of downtown. **[At the time the projected opening of the Dulles extension was 2017. It was delayed after cracks were discovered in concrete piers for its elevated tracks. It is still not operating as I write this revision, but the current projection is for a July 2021 opening.]** Our ride was only a couple of stops, but it was still kind of fun to be on a silver line train.

The short trip we took was just long enough for one of our kids to lose his SmarTrip card. Between the initial value and the passes, the cards were worth about \$50, and this kid had just put it in the loose pocket of his gym shorts without thinking. I was irate, but of course being mad wouldn't solve anything. We had a chat with the station manager, and while he scolded the kid, he let him through the turnstile.

We had dinner at Five Guys burgers just above the McPherson Square station. Five Guys is a D.C. institution, and this particular location (just east of the White House) has been patronized many times by the last three Presidents. They charge steep prices (though I think the same as they do at their Minneapolis location), but the portions are enormous. Even the kids thought that the gourmet burgers were unnecessarily large, and I don't think anyone finished their fries. It was a tasty meal, though, and I think everyone enjoyed the experience. **[Five Guys has expanded rapidly since this was written. There's even one in West Des Moines now. I find that their "little cheeseburger" is the proper one to order. "Little" by their standards would be a standard entrée burger (like a quarter-pounder or Whopper) anywhere else. There's also no need to ever order fries at Five Guys. They provide peanuts free for the taking to everyone waiting in line, and stocking up on them makes the fries completely unnecessary.]**

I felt a bit self-conscious at Five Guys. I ended up eating alone, because everyone else in the group had positioned themselves at tables where there was no room for me to join them. I don't think that was intentional, but it did make me feel like the unpopular kid in the school cafeteria.

We had more metro issues on our way back. I'd given my SmarTrip card to the kid who had lost his, but when we left the station he couldn't get it to work. Once again we headed to the station manager. He'd apparently somehow tapped the card incorrectly, and it hadn't registered when he went through the turnstile to enter the metro. That's why the machine wouldn't let him exit. We argued quite a while, and I think the manager thought the kid had jumped the turnstile. He could tell there was a pass on the card, though, so eventually he let him pass.

I'd end up talking with various station managers five or six times on this trip, and I was far from the only one who did so. Pretty much every tourist we saw in the metro had issues with their SmarTrip cards (they wouldn't register the first time they tapped them, and then when they tried again, they'd double-register), and a lot of locals had problems as well. I got the feeling that you could probably ride the metro for free by just telling a lot of sob stories to the station managers. Smart card fare payment seems like the wave of the future in every city, but I really wish they'd work out the kinks before adopting it wholesale.

When we got back to the hotel I found out that another kid in our group wasn't feeling well. I'm not sure what exactly was up, but he apparently had a badly upset stomach and a bit of dizziness. I happened to have some Pepto-Bismol tablets with me **[something I**

always travel with], and I asked if he'd like any of those. He tried them, and apparently they did help. It was a couple days before he was back to 100%, though.

# Saturday, May 30

## Washington, D.C. area

I was up around 7:30 this morning and snacked on a few of the grocery items we'd bought on Thursday. About 8:30 the team again gathered in the lobby. This time, before the kids could get distracted by side conversations, I started going through trivia questions I happened to have on my Kindle. That was a wise decision, as it got the group thinking about why we were really here. During yesterday's games, many of our kids had sort of a "deer in the headlights" look about them, but today they were much more into the competition.

I was looking forward to our first game today, because it would be with one of the best moderators in the tournament. I've always liked Ernie Anderson, a good old boy D.J. from West Virginia. He reads well, and he always makes the games fun, regardless of how the teams are doing. Unfortunately, while we were in "Uncle Ernie's" room, he wasn't our reader. They're apparently trying to train fresh talent to work at the tournament, so Ernie was working as the judge rather than the moderator. The actual reader was not a particularly good one. He had a thick Asian accent and stumbled on a couple of occasions. I can understand why they want to get some new readers, but I can't care I cared to be one of the guinea pigs that was breaking this guy in.

Our first game was against El Paso High School from El Paso, Texas. I was a bit surprised that there actually was a school with that name. We've played several other schools from El Paso in the they were named after sections of the city (like Ysleta, where my sister Margaret lived when she was a little girl) or famous people (like Coronado, the school that would end up winning this year's tournament). Presumably El Paso High School was the first school in the city, and I assume it's located in an older part of town.

On the whole we've done pretty well against Texas teams over the years, and while this match wasn't a win for us, it was a good game. We ended up losing 230 – 210, and the kids felt good about how they'd done.

The El Paso game was at 9am, and we wouldn't play again until afternoon. The kids passed most of that time either at the hotel pool (a strange indoor/outdoor affair) or playing cards. As I almost always do when I've got spare time while traveling, I went out exploring. This was at least partly a shopping trip, and my goal was to get as much change back from my purchases as possible. I knew we'd need to add value to the SmarTrip cards to cover our other bus fares (and for the ones without passes to pay balances that had become negative). I didn't want to put large amounts of value on the cards, though, so I wanted \$1 and \$5 bills to use at the vending machines (which don't make change). I got the feeling a counterfeiter must have as I went to three different stores and made small purchases with \$20 bills. One of the clerks apologized that she had no tens as she passed three fives to me. Fives were exactly what I wanted, though. I could put them together with the ones I'd brought along to get the correct amounts we needed to add.



During the El Paso game

Most of the group went back to Minimax #1 for lunch, but I went to a Wendy's that was one of the more distant places recommended by the Department of Defense. It was just north of King and Beauregard, a little over a mile east of the Hilton. (This was actually quite close to the hotel where the Buscher family was staying.) I zeroed out a gift card there and got still more change by paying the balance (just over a dollar) with yet another \$20 bill. By the time my journey was over the pockets of my cargo pants were full of small bills.

Even all the ones and fives I had would turn out to be too little, though. I'd checked the status of all the SmarTrip cards before setting out to get change. Unfortunately, I'd find out later that—unlike every other transit agency I've ever dealt with—SmarTrip doesn't update their website in real time. I thought that most of the cards would need \$6 in added value to cover the rest of the trip, but the balances I saw were as of the end of business hours yesterday, and everyone had taken at least one bus trip (and in some cases accidentally tapped their card more than once) after that. I wouldn't discover this problem until some of them failed to work properly, though. That would give us more fun-filled dealings with the WMATA station managers. Apparently only the vending machines actually give up-to-date information about a card's status; the employees seemed surprised that I'd think I could get current information online. It's really no different than checking a gift card balance, though, and if stores and restaurants can give current information on their websites, I'd think the Washington Metro could do the same. **[While I've had issues in other cities (most notably Los Angeles), Washington does seem to have the worst fare payment system anywhere.]**

I had “entertainment” of a sort as I ate my lunch at Wendy’s. The manager was interviewing a job applicant, and I enjoyed eavesdropping. I know fast food doesn’t exactly attract the most skilled employees, but from the questions he asked, he was obviously expecting the worst. Much of the interview revolved around whether the worker would actually show up when she was scheduled to work. It would never occur to me not to come to work unless I was horribly ill, but it was clear that no shows were a problem at Wendy’s. The rest of the interview was trying to establish that the applicant was actually willing to do what the job required. In particular, the manager asked several times whether the girl would be willing to clean things—and I must say she did come across as the sort of princess who couldn’t be bothered to actually work. The interview was also interesting because English appeared to be the second language for both the manager and the prospective employee. The manager was south Asian, and the girl looking for a job was Hispanic. Both of them spoke English very slowly and carefully, making an already forced conversation even more so. I left when I’d finished my meal, but I’d be interested to know whether the girl actually got the job.

Our next game was scheduled for 1pm, though the room it was in was actually running about fifteen minutes late. We faced a team from Briarcliff Manor, an exclusive suburb north of New York City. The team consisted of three Asians and a Jew, and unfortunately the academic stereotypes of such ethnicities held. It certainly didn’t help that there were two bonus questions on science, one on math, and one about the Old Testament. We lost a laugher 380 – 115.

The Briarcliff team seemed shocked that we’d actually driven from Iowa to Washington. They hadn’t even considered driving, though it would only be about a 250-mile trip for them. In fact, they’d flown. They claimed flying was cheaper than taking the train. I actually priced that after the game was over, and my instincts were right—they were wrong. The high-speed Acela would cost more than flying, but unless they could get round-trip plane tickets for under a hundred bucks, there’s no way the Northeast Regional service would cost more. Westchester County Airport is surprisingly cheap (quite a bit less expensive than JFK or LaGuardia), but most fares to D.C. were more in the \$250 range round-trip, even with a good deal of advance purchase. I also can’t imagine that given the connections they’d have to make at both ends that flying was much quicker or any more convenient than driving or taking the train. Intercity buses would be another option, and I know there are a lot of cheap buses that run through the eastern megalopolis.

We only had about twenty minutes between our last two games. The final game was in a room run by another “old-timer”, Chip Beall, the CEO of Questions Unlimited, the company that runs the tournament. Unfortunately Chip was also not actually reading in his room. He served as the judge while a much less talented younger man read the questions.

The final game was versus Byram Hills High School from Armonk, New York. Armonk is the home of IBM and another exclusive NYC suburb. Their team was not nearly as good as Briarcliff Manor, though. We were surprisingly well matched with them, and it ended up being a very close game. We led by five points after the first quarter, and it was tied at the end of each of the other quarters.

If Chip had been the reader, this game might well have ended differently. Unfortunately there were two big issues that came up during the lightning round about which Byram Hills complained. First, the New Yorkers had chosen a category about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They missed some question (I forget at this point what exactly it was), and the reader re-read the question for our team. Unfortunately he changed the pronunciation of one word in it during the re-read. Before our team could even answer, the Byram Hills coach complained that the question should be thrown out because it was said differently to the two teams. Sadly for us, he was correct according to the rules. However, they didn’t just throw the question out. They instead substituted a different literature question. This was not another question about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but one that asked them to identify an Irish writer from some of his more obscure works. They guessed “James Joyce” (easily the best-known Irish writer) and were correct. I’m pretty sure that even with the correct pronunciation, Byram Hills wouldn’t have gotten the *To Kill a Mockingbird* question right, and our captain clearly knew it. That would have been a twenty-point swing, and it would have given us the win

The other issue was a question about Homer’s *Odyssey*, the lightning round category our team had chosen. The question referred to Odysseus’ disguise. Our captain said “homeless man”, and her answer was accepted. There was a slight hesitation before Chip ruled it correct, though, which prompted the Byram Hills coach to ask what the actual answer given on the script was. That answer was apparently “beggar”, and the coach argued that this was different and “homeless man” should be counted wrong. I’ve never read *The Odyssey* myself, so I can’t really say. The two answers are certainly similar, though, particularly in modern usage. (I googled the topic while writing this, and found the phrase “homeless beggar” in more than one description.) The game was delayed while Chip conferred with judges in the other centers. They unanimously agreed that our answer should be accepted, but the Byram Hills coach kept whining about it even after the game was over. **[I can understand complaining when you lose, but it never makes sense to whine after you’ve won.]**

The game was tied 215 – 215 after the final round, and the press release we sent out afterwards reported it as a tie. However, the rules at nationals specify that every game must have a winner. I really wish they’d do at nationals like I do at the tournament we host at Garrigan and treat ties as a win for both teams, but we need to deal with the rules as they are. To break ties at nationals they keep asking toss-up questions until someone answers correctly. They don’t score any points, but they do win the game. Those rules have been consistent for decades. When we first went to nationals in 1995, we won because of a tie-breaker about the TV show *The Simpsons*, and in honor of that I always include a Simpsons question at the tournament we host every year. They went through three different tie-breakers in this game. The third was about New York City, and it’s not surprising that a team from that city’s suburbs got it right.

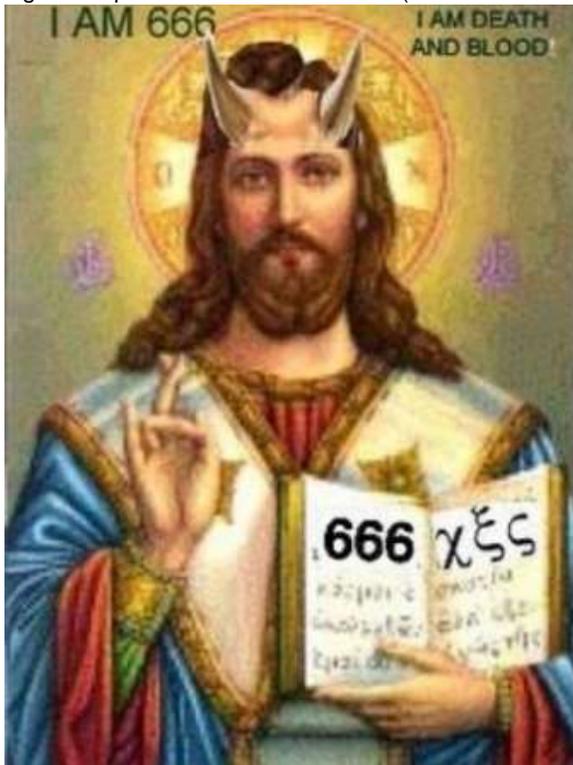
I had more updates to do on the school website. Most importantly, our boys golf team had won the state championship (for the second straight year), so of course we had to congratulate them on that. Our website is normally full of pictures, and I had to be a bit

creative to come up with them when I was in Washington and the golf team was in Iowa. I ended up searching through the social media website Twitter. While I don't have a Twitter account (nor Facebook, nor Instagram, nor much of anything else), pretty much all the kids do, and almost none of them choose to make their accounts private. It was not really surprising that a couple of the golfers had posted pictures of the team with their trophy, and I was able to use one of those for our website. I also did a screen capture of the final scores as they appeared on the state athletic association site. That combination made a suitable recognition.

Everyone changed clothes, and we met up again at the bus stop. Bus 7-A is the only one that stops at Mark Center on weekends, and it comes only every 45 minutes on Saturdays. I'd downloaded the schedule from their website, and there was also one posted at the stop—though the times on the two differed slightly. As it turned out neither schedule was accurate. We waited ten minutes past the posted time, and eventually I called their "next bus" number on my cell phone. This service is easy to use in some cities, but in Washington they make you listen through a ton of unnecessary information before you can enter your bus stop number. Once I did, it turned out they didn't actually have up-to-date information. All the phone recording did was give a time from the schedule, saying the next bus was due in about half an hour. It turned out we waited about five more minutes, so presumably we boarded the previous bus, which was about fifteen minutes late. **[It is kind of odd that they don't use a GPS locator to give current information in Washington.]**

We took a different route to get to the Pentagon than we had before. Beauregard Street was under construction, so the bus detoured through a different residential area, winding through a sea of cheaply built homes that probably sell for half a million each.

At the Pentagon we caught the yellow line metro, which we took to Gallery Place, right in the heart of D.C. We had more turnstile issues when exiting, which required a station manager to check the validity of our passes. It was here that we discovered that some of them had been credited for a more expensive pass than I'd actually ordered. Apparently online orders are actually processed by human clerks, and obviously someone screwed up. That seems like an incredibly inefficient way of handling things in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but as long as the passes covered our needs (and we weren't charged the higher price), I didn't really care, though.



**"White Jesus is the devil"**

We made our way upstairs and were greeted by a protest going on in the plaza at the top of the metro steps. Some rather Caribbean-looking black men were carrying signs saying "White Jesus is the devil". The signs featured a Renaissance painting of Christ with his head modified so horns grew out of it and a big red circle and slash "not" symbol obliterating the classical depiction of our Savoir. One of the guys bellowed on a megaphone, "There ain't nothing in the Bible that says Jesus was white." That's true, of course, but neither is there anything Biblical that would remotely imply he was black.

I was too polite to take a picture of the religious nuts as we passed by. However, while writing this I Googled the phrase "white Jesus is the devil" and came up with over a million results, including the image shown here. It's pretty similar to what the protestors in Washington showed. There appear to be several unrelated groups that have this strange belief, and they have staged similar protests all over the country. All claim to be "ministering" to black people. One claimed that the Dominican people were in fact the lost tribe of Israel, and they used that for their main argument as to why Jesus must have been black.

The protest was particularly entertaining given that our reason for heading downtown was to go to mass. Indeed, in the vestibule of St. Patrick's Church were pictures of the current Pope **[who visited St. Patrick's on a trip to the United States]** and his predecessor, and I must say the grimacing Pope Benedict looked far more Satanic than Jesus with the horns. I must say it's nice that the current Pope looks and acts happy.

This week was Trinity Sunday, which has been the case on some of our previous quiz bowl trips as well. The priest began by saying that the doctrine of the trinity is difficult to explain. He then said that as a theology major at college he had taken multiple courses about the topic. Jake was sitting next to me. At one time he had considered becoming a priest, and theology was one of his three majors in college. He commented that he had taken only one course on the trinity, and the most memorable thing that came up there was St. Patrick's example of a shamrock as "Three in one". No sooner had Jake whispered this, than the priest brought up the shamrock analogy. We both got a laugh out of that.

This church did communion differently than any other Catholic church I've been to. At most churches people come up to receive the elements via the center aisle and leave to the sides. Here people went forward using both the center and side aisles, and they returned the way they came. That made communion go very fast. Indeed, they had only gotten through the Father and Son verses of a Trinitarian hymn by the time everyone had received the elements.

We made our way back to Gallery Place and saw that the devil Jesus protesters had been replaced by another group of religious nuts. These carried signs for "godhatesfags.com". I've seen similar protesters in the past. They're from the Westboro Baptist Church, a Topeka-based group (not affiliated with any "real" Baptist denomination) that has the same feelings about gay people that the earlier

protesters had about white Jesus. They're frequently in the news, particularly when they picket military funerals claiming that war deaths are God's revenge for our nation's toleration of homosexuality. It was not surprising that this group of protesters carried a sign that depicted President Obama with devil horns. Their specific message was that America is doomed because of the legalization of same-sex marriage. They'd be in the news in the coming week by picketing the funeral of Beau Biden, the Vice President's son.



**Exterior and interior of St. Patrick's Church – the oldest church in Washington, D.C**

While there are many churches near Gallery Place, it's probably no coincidence that the one nearest these protesters was First Congregational Church of Washington, a UCC church (the denomination of which I'm a member) that displayed a rainbow banner out front. While they've since been joined by Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ was the first of the old "mainline Protestant" denominations to accept same-sex marriage. While I have mixed feelings about holding same-sex weddings in churches, it's certainly not an issue that's going to make me leave the church. What's more, I definitely fail to see the problem some people have with civil marriages of same-sex couples. Even if God did hate gay people (and it's mostly obscure Old Testament passages that portray the Creator as anything but loving and tolerant), it just seems anti-American to me to deny rights to people with whom you don't agree. People claim that same-sex marriage infringes on their religious freedom, but it does nothing of the sort. No one is suggesting that conservative Christians should marry gay people or that their churches should perform those weddings. Instead they're suggesting that everyone should be able to spend their lives with the people they love and that they should all have the same legal rights; things like taxes, inheritance, and hospital visitation shouldn't be any different because of sexual preference. Imposing religious views on others is something they do in places like Iran; "religious freedom" in America means that no one should insist that others believe as they do. Conservatives always imply that same-sex marriage will be the end of our country, but it seems to me that divorce and adultery are far greater threats than monogamous gay people—but almost no one seems to care about them.

**[The shouts of conservative Christians have only gotten worse in the age of Donald Trump. His supporters have made it clear that they don't care at all about REAL Christian values like charity, tolerance, and turning the other cheek. All they seem to want is to impose their viewpoints on others.]**

There always seems to be one "soapbox" detour in each of these travelogues, and I guess that was it for this one. We made our way past the protesters and into Gallery Place station. It was a bit awkward to get to the red line, which was the train we needed. The station is set up so that to get there we had to first walk the length of another platform and then go downstairs from there. I assume they built around existing infrastructure, but it is far from convenient for passengers.

We took the red line east to Union Station. **[It would be interesting to know just how many cities have a Union Station.]** While this is primarily a train station, it also has numerous shops and an enormous food court that made a good place to have dinner **[really a better option than Pentagon City]**. There are lots of choices, and they're set up to handle a lot of people quickly. Most of the kids went to a place called Bojangles, which specializes in fried chicken. **[Interestingly, I ate there for the first time just a month before writing this revision.]** I instead made my way to a crepe stand. The woman running the stand was East European, and the cook was Hispanic. I ordered in English, and obviously something was lost in translation. I got a combination of a sweet and a savory crepe. The savory ham and cheese crepe was exactly what I ordered and quite good. However, for the sweet component I ordered a dulce de leche crepe, but instead of cooked condensed milk, the crepe was filled with bananas and brown sugar. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't what I ordered. The bill also came to more than it was supposed to be. The woman didn't seem to understand when I pointed that out, though, and it wasn't worth making a scene over.

I also had a pretzel and some frozen lemonade from Auntie Anne's. I couldn't help but notice that the prices there were about 50¢ per item less than they were at Pentagon City. I'm not sure why the mall is so expensive, but I need to remember for future reference that Union Station's prices are pretty much the same as you'd find anywhere.



The youngest of the Buschers made an interesting purchase at Union Station. He bought a splat ball from a stand operated by a guy that seemed like a carnival barker. This was just a soft plastic shell shaped like a strawberry and filled with some sort of gel. It could be squeezed (sort of like those stress balls they used to sell) or thrown at things. When thrown, it would splat against the surface (hence the name) and then sort of walk downward as gravity took effect. While even the kid admitted it wasn't worth the \$5 he paid for it, the splat ball really was a fun little toy.

The kids were somewhat depressed after losing all our games. So was I, for that matter. By the time church and dinner were over, though, we were all in much better spirits. Everyone was smiling and joking by the time we left Union Station.

Several of the kids wanted to snap the requisite pictures of the Capitol, so our next goal was to do that. I knew there was a good viewpoint just outside Smithsonian station, so our next goal was to get there. We took the red line to Metro Center and waited there to transfer to a train that would take us to Smithsonian. Three different lines (orange, blue, and silver) run on the tracks that go there, but we still waited nearly half an hour to make the transfer. The problem was that they were doing track work all weekend. Theoretically all three lines were running every 25 minutes, but they didn't stagger when the lines ran. So what actually happened was that every 25 minutes three trains would go by in rapid succession.

While we were waiting, a rather confused looking Hispanic woman looked repeatedly at the pillar that showed what stations trains would go to and also at the digital displays that announced when the next trains would arrive. Eventually she very hesitantly asked me in a strange combination of Spanish and English if the silver line would take her to Stadium/Armory station. Silver was the next train that would be arriving, and I was pleased to be able to tell her that it would indeed go to her destination.

Eventually we did board that silver line train, and we made our way over to Smithsonian station. Unfortunately, there really wasn't much point in our going there. We went upstairs to the middle of National Mall, only to find that there was construction on the Capitol dome. The whole building was covered in scaffolding. They were also doing construction on the mall itself, which made the whole park a sea of orange plastic fencing. It was far from the most photogenic scene.



**Website illustration of strawberry splat ball**

Because of the track work on the line we'd been on, I figured it would be quicker to take the yellow line back to the Pentagon. L'Enfant Plaza station is just south of National Mall, so I figured we'd walk over there to catch the yellow line. Just shortly after we set out Deb Kollasch said she felt a sense of déjà vu, and she was certainly right. A couple years ago on our last trip to Washington we got thoroughly lost trying to find L'Enfant Plaza station, and we'd end up getting completely lost again. L'Enfant Plaza itself is a barren concrete space surrounded by '60s office buildings in the brutalist style. (It has to be the worst possible way of honoring the French architect who came up with the elegant city plan for Washington, D.C.) There's a sign at the entrance to the plaza that says "Metro" and has an arrow pointing in the direction of the plaza. We, of course, followed that arrow. Once we were in the plaza itself, there was no indication at all of where the metro station actually was. Like far too many aspects of the Washington metro, they seem to think everybody should just know ahead of time what they're doing.



**Construction at the Capitol and on National Mall**

Eventually one of the kids got out his I-phone and asked Siri (Apple's voice-responsive digital assistant) where exactly the metro entrance was. We were then directed through a maze of paths between various bunker-like concrete buildings, none of which had any indication that it led to the metro. We ended up a couple blocks east and right on the street we'd been on when we started. It turns out the entrance to L'Enfant Plaza station isn't actually at L'Enfant Plaza. It would have been much simpler if the sign we'd followed at the beginning had been turned 90 degrees. My bet is that there's an auxiliary entrance in one of those ugly government buildings, but there was certainly no indication of that.

Even when we reached our destination, we weren't entirely sure where we were. That's because the station indicator (a big brown pillar with the name of the station on it) was missing for some reason. We finally did find the entrance, though, and there was a real sense of accomplishment in getting there. We'd easily wasted enough time wandering around, though, that it would have been quicker to just catch a train at Smithsonian.

**[This experience is yet another of the issues I have with the Washington Metro. Most transit systems have distinctive signage that makes their stations easy to identify. Even when the signs aren't missing or broken, the small brown pylons that mark D.C. station entrances are easy to overlook. They are also very bad at maintaining things, which makes for far too many unmarked entrances.]**

Fitting the theme of the evening, when we got back to the Pentagon, we had a 35-minute wait for the next bus. The ride back to Mark Center was interesting, though. Sitting near our group was a Cuban guy who played the tympani. It was convenient that a couple of our players were percussionists and were able to share experiences with him.

Back at the hotel I checked the status of the other teams we'd played. It was some consolation that most of them had made playoffs. At least we could have the satisfaction of knowing we'd lost to good teams.



**L'Enfant Plaza – Washington, D.C.**

## **Sunday, May 31**

### **Washington, D.C. area**

I was up around 7:00 this morning. I thought that was comparatively late, but I think I beat almost everyone else in the group. Jake was in bed quite a bit after that, and all the kids were slow getting up as well. Deb Kollasch had suggested we have a joint breakfast in her room so we could share the various breakfast items that had been dispersed to various rooms. She had to call some of the kids repeatedly to remind them to come down there, though.

The nice thing about doing poorly in competition is that we had all day today free. I'd carefully checked the bus schedule, since service is even less frequent on Sunday than on Saturday. So, even with the kids' slowness, I knew precisely when we had to be at the bus stop. We met in the lobby at 8:50 and made our way over there. A team from Oklahoma arrived at Mark Center station shortly after we did, but they went to a different bus bay. That bay served City of Alexandria buses rather than Washington metro buses. I don't think the Alexandria buses run at all on Sunday, and if they do service would be infrequent at best. Their coach obviously had no clue what she was doing, and she seemed rather surprised that I did know when the buses would run. (She seemed oblivious to the fact that there was a schedule for bus 7-A posted right by the stop.) The Oklahoma kids ended up crowding onto the same bus we did, and they transferred to the metro with us at Pentagon station. I have no clue what they did after that, but hopefully they made it back all right.

**[As I'm sure you've figured out from my other travelogues, I tend to plan things to death when I travel. Partly that's because I enjoy planning, but I also feel a responsibility to know what I'm doing when I'm supervising kids. In modern times (when schedules are easily available online), I can't imagine just showing up to a bus stop and having no clue when the bus would come.]**

We had to add fare to some of the cards again before we could take the metro. SmarTrip cards allow you to ride the bus with a negative balance, but you can't use a pass for the train until that balance is brought back above zero. The farebox on the bus had made an annoying squawk when some of the kids had tapped their cards, which was the indication that money needed to be added. So, I got out even more of my own cash and added value to them. Theoretically the kids paid the cost of transportation ahead of time. It turned out to be significantly higher than I'd estimated, though (mostly because it required buses as well as trains), and I wasn't going to make them pay the difference after the fact.

When the train we wanted arrived at Pentagon station, we all rushed into a car. By a bizarre coincidence, the Buscher family was in that exact same car. They were staying at a different hotel, because the Hilton was sold out due to our tournament and a conference of Hispanic religion teachers. On the days we were playing in the tournament, they'd driven over to the Hilton, parked there, and then gone around with us when we went out. We had a much better deal on parking than the general rate, though, so it was quite expensive for them to do that. They decided today that they'd take their hotel shuttle, which goes to the King Street metro station, board the train there, and then meet us at our ultimate destination. Somehow they ended up on the exact same train and the exact same car that we got on. It was really bizarre to see them there.

Our first destination on Sunday was the Newseum. Funded mostly by the Gannett newspaper conglomerate, this used to be located in what was then the *USA Today* building in Arlington. Years ago on one of our first quiz bowl trips our group got stuck in an elevator there. "McPaper" has since relocated to a more suburban facility near the CIA campus in Langley. They've moved the Newseum to a choice piece of real estate on Pennsylvania Avenue four blocks from the Capitol, between the National Archives and the Canadian Embassy. The new Newseum is absolutely enormous (six floors that cover a city block), easily on par with any of the Smithsonian museums. It's as much a museum of relatively recent history (from the mid-1800s to the present) as it is a museum of journalism. One of the most interesting features is a recreation of central Berlin during the Cold War, which is expanded from sections of the Berlin Wall that

they had on display at the old location. The display (which takes up most of the basement of the building, with a guard tower that soars into the atrium) does a good job of portraying what life was like on both sides of Berlin. Something I'd never noticed in the various locations where I'd seen sections of the Berlin Wall was that the graffiti for which the wall was famous was only on the side facing West Berlin. The East German side of the wall was whitewashed to make potential escapees stand out against it, and of course no one in a police state would have thought of defacing it.



The Berlin display at the Newseum – Washington, D.C.

Another excellent display at the Newseum highlights what life in New York was like in the wake of 9/11, and they also have interesting exhibits that explain how the satellite feeds for live TV newscasts work, how bias can affect news coverage, how modern technology has changed the media, and the various landmark Supreme Court decisions that have affirmed the freedoms in the Bill of Rights. Every year I use my own money to take the group on some sort of excursion (like the swamp tours in New Orleans), and this year I'd unilaterally decided to take the group to the Newseum. Ahead of time the kids weren't really looking forward to it, but it ended up being a highlight of the trip for almost everyone. It really is an excellent attraction.

**[Sadly, the Newseum closed its doors in 2018. When it moved to the new location, it became its own non-profit organization. They continued to receive some funding from Gannett, as well as from other media companies like the *Washington Post* and NBC. Even with those subsidies and their steep admission charges, they were unable to cover their expenses and forced into bankruptcy. Apparently many of their exhibits are now at Johns Hopkins University. Perhaps someday I'll go to Baltimore and see what the successor to the Newseum is like.]**

We walked from the Newseum to the Smithsonian Museum of American History. This is one of those walks that appears quite short on a map, but in reality took fifteen or twenty minutes. **[Almost every distance in D.C. is longer than it appears.]** Large portions of that museum were closed for renovation. While that was annoying on our visit, it's probably for the best in the end. The American History Museum was dedicated by President Kennedy, and honestly it doesn't seem to have changed much since the '60s. The exhibits all looked familiar, and I can't say I was particularly captivated by any of them—nor were the kids. Hopefully the renovations will make things fresher and more interesting.

I had lunch at the American History Museum, which was a mistake. The food service at all the Smithsonian museums is incredibly overpriced and honestly not all that good. The place I ate was a café that theoretically featured signature foods from various regions of the country. I chose to have a pulled pork sandwich and a key lime tart. I passed on beverages, but even so the total came to \$16. The sandwich featured Carolina-style barbecue with a vinegar-based sauce that just seemed weird to me. The sauce also made the bun so soggy that it literally disintegrated. There was no plastic flatware available, so I ended up just shoveling pulled pork into my mouth with my fingers. I didn't care much for the tart, either. It looked beautiful, but the crust was dry and had an off taste, and the filling was surprisingly bland. It was easily the most disappointing meal of the trip.

I gave the exhibits a quick once-over and then made my way back to the lobby. For the afternoon the group split into two parts. Some of them stayed on the mall and mostly visited the Air and Space Museum. The rest (including me) went to the National Zoo. I'd been to the zoo once before. That was years ago, though, and it was kind of nice to see again. I wouldn't say National Zoo is my favorite animal park (I'd rank both New Orleans and Omaha ahead of it), but it's a large zoo with a wide variety of animals. It's also free—which makes it about twenty bucks cheaper than most zoos are these days.

We took the metro to the zoo. There are actually two stops equidistant from the pedestrian entrance: one called Woodley Park—Zoo and another called Cleveland Park. I knew from advance reading I'd done that, in spite of the name, the latter is the preferable stop to take. The walk from Woodley Park—Zoo to the entrance is all uphill, while it's basically level from Cleveland Park.

It was a hot day, and the kids wanted to stop to get some drinks as we made our way to the zoo entrance. We found a vending machine in front of a laundromat, and one of the kids put some money in it. He wanted a Mountain Dew, but what came out was Dr. Pepper. Another of the kids traded the Dr. Pepper for him, and they tried a different button. I forget what was selected this time and what came out, but again it was different than what the label said. They ended up trying four different buttons, and none of them was what it should be. It was really rather funny that the machine was so badly screwed up.

Since some of the kids still wanted specific drinks, we also stopped at a CVS pharmacy we happened to pass. That place was memorable, because almost every customer who passed the door made lights flash, a buzzer go off, and a recording play saying "you have activated our inventory control system". The cashiers just waved everybody through as if this was totally routine. I have no idea what the problem was, but obviously something was way too sensitive.

National Zoo is well away from downtown Washington, so it's off the main tourist radar. Pretty much everyone at the zoo was local, mostly Hispanic families taking the kids out for some weekend fun. It was surprisingly uncrowded for a summer weekend, and even though it was hot most of the animals were out on display

The big thing you're supposed to see at National Zoo is the pandas. I remember when I was in grade school and President Nixon received HsingHsing and Ling-Ling as gifts from the People's Republic of China. (I always thought the former was spelled "Tsing-Tsing", but apparently the preferred spelling is with an "h".) The zoo still displays the original crate in which those pandas were shipped. While Hsing-Hsing became the oldest living panda outside China, he died in 1999. None of the pandas' cubs survived past infancy. The original pair was replaced a few years back, though, and a third panda (Bao-Bao) was born through artificial insemination at National Zoo two years ago. Apparently the vast majority of baby pandas die, even in the wild, so it was very unusual that Bao-Bao has lived to an age where she can care for herself. We saw all three of the giant pandas, which really was a treat. Apparently in another year Bao-Bao will be sent back to China, so it's good that we saw her while we could.

We gawked at the pandas, and I couldn't resist picking up a stuffed panda at their gift shop. **[I still have that panda among the "toys" I display in my room at school.]**

We also made the rounds of all the other animals: small mammals, big cats, reptiles, sea lions, elephants, tortoises, gorillas, etc. One of the ones I found the most interesting was a deer-like animal called a kudu that is apparently highly sensitive to sound. There were numerous signs near the kudu display cautioning both visitors and workers to be quiet in the vicinity. That made me ponder just how noisy a zoo must seem to the animals.

While all the kids liked the zoo, it was fascinating what excited some of them. One of the kids seemed rather bored by the pandas but was excited to discover a rat in one of the primate compounds. Another was in seventh heaven when he found that one of the concession stands sold Dippin' Dots, those little gravel-like bits of ice cream that are a staple of ballparks. I wondered if that kid knew that the exact same thing was available in the frozen food section at Hy-Vee for a fourth the price they sold it for at the zoo. **[Since my diabetic diagnosis, Dippin' Dots are one of the few sweet treats I can eat without causing issues, so I'm well aware of the generic version they sell in grocery stores.]**



One of the famous pandas at National Zoo



The crate that brought Hsing-Hsing & Ling-Ling to America

We left the zoo and walked downhill to Woodley Park station. The handicapped entrance is the one closest to the zoo, so we made our way toward the elevator. It turned out to be a very crowded ride. In addition to us there was a couple with an enormous stroller. We all fit, but just barely. The kid in the stroller stared up at all the sea of unfamiliar faces. She didn't cry, but she clearly wasn't happy about the situation.

We rode back to Smithsonian and met the rest of the group just outside the station there. We then all rode over to McPherson Square so we could check out the White House. We snapped a few pictures there, one of which I ended up sending to the local paper.



**The group and a "selfie" at the White House**

That picture ended up causing a bit of a problem. If you check out the picture at left, you'll notice there are eight kids in the photograph. Our group, however, had nine students

in it. I have no idea why Noah Buscher wasn't in the photo (both he and his family had come to the White House with us), but he wasn't. Molly clearly wasn't happy when the paper published a picture that didn't include her son, but there was little I could do about it after the fact. I'd actually sent the paper three different photos. It's unfortunate that the one they chose to publish was the one that didn't include the entire group.

We rode the metro back to the Pentagon, where we had another long wait for the bus. We'd decided that our official "team meal" this year would just be pizza, and we filled much of the time deciding on exactly what kind of pizza everyone wanted. The women chaperones had gotten a flyer under their hotel door that offered a pretty good deal, so most of the price ended up coming out of the money left over from the breakfast donation.



**Long wait for the bus at Pentagon station**

If you look carefully in the photo of the bored kids at right (which, by the way, includes the one who was missing at the White House), you'll notice that there's a sign on the grass at the left side. That sign features a camera with a slash through it, and I couldn't resist taking a picture of the "no photography" sign. The prohibition is because the Pentagon building is in the background. I justified the "illegal" picture by the fact that the prohibition was technically beyond where I was standing, rather than at the bus stop itself.

I'm pretty sure the ban technically extends to the entire Pentagon grounds, though. It's a silly rule, since there are thousands of pictures of the Pentagon available, many of them published by the military itself. What's more, absolutely anyone could snap a much clearer picture than this one while driving by on the nearby streets and expressways. All the ban does is make people (like me) want to be rebellious and take some snapshots.

The bus we caught ended up standing room only, and it was crowded until we got to Southern Towers. Weekend transit is always infrequent, which often makes it as crowded as rush hour. This was far from the most pleasant bus ride I've ever taken.

We ended up having our pizza in the hotel bar, which was closed on Sunday night. It was actually quite good pizza, and while it was far from the fanciest team meal we've done, everyone seemed to enjoy it.

After we ate I took a couple of kids over to the 7-Eleven at Southern Towers. One of them bought an enormous slurpee in some strange new Mountain Dew flavor. He was extremely excited about his purchase, but it was clear that shortly after he left the store, he regretted it. Not only did it give him the classic frozen headache, but it also upset his stomach. Fortunately none of the effects were long-lasting.

Back on the thirteenth floor, I did some more work on the website and then read for a bit. Finally I turned in for the night.

# Monday, June 1

## Alexandria, Virginia to Zanesville, Ohio

I was up about 6:30 this morning. I had a leisurely shower and then packed my stuff up into the Traverse. While we'd be checking out this morning, we'd leave the vehicles in the ramp until afternoon. While I still think twice about leaving things in a vehicle after we had one of the Suburbans broken into in Chicago a few years back, I figured it should be safe in the hotel ramp. Fortunately that was indeed the case.

The kids came down to the lobby around 7:30, and we got their stuff packed as well. Things fit a bit easier on our return trip, because we wouldn't have Noah's bag. He'd be staying another couple of days and going home with his parents.

It took quite a while to check out, mostly because I wanted a print-out of the folio for each room. The desk clerk assured me this was unnecessary, because they would automatically be e-mailed to me. I insisted, though, and I was glad I did. Thanks to the stupid reservation system that associates specific names with rooms, the only statement I got by e-mail was for the room I stayed in. Had I relied on that, I'd never have gotten the others. While she acted like it was an imposition, the clerk did print out the folios, which gave me the documentation I needed for a school check. Everything was in order, and there were no unexpected charges.

We made our way to the bus stop, where we were greeted by an enormous traffic jam. Apparently the Department of Defense was having a conference at Mark Center. Each car that was entering the facility had to go through special security, which backed up traffic for blocks. Buses couldn't make it to the actual bus stop, so they had a police officer directing those waiting at the transit center to a place on the street where we could actually catch the bus. We were expecting to catch bus 7-M, but the cop told us it wasn't running because of the traffic jam. Instead we boarded 7-W, a bus I didn't even know existed. That bus only runs at rush hour. I have no idea where it may go further west, but from our point of view the only difference between it and the 7-M was that it made one stop at Southern Towers before getting on the interstate and running express. Once we left Mark Center we moved right along, and we made it to the Pentagon quickly.

My intent today was that I'd pay everyone's bus fares in one big cash payment to avoid draining the cards further. I'd said that clearly when we left, but a couple of the kids (and one of the adults) almost mechanically tapped their cards when they boarded. They were greeted by the shrill beep that indicated there was a negative balance. So, once again we had to stop at the vending machines at Pentagon station and get the balances back in the black before we could proceed to the metro. Fortunately I had a pocket full of change, so I was able to get the cards to 5¢, the minimum allowable amount.

We took the metro just one stop north to Arlington Cemetery. I'd bought tickets ahead of time for a "tourmobile" tour of the park, which drops off at the key points of interest. We picked up the passes for that and then waited nearly half an hour for the Buschers to show up. Once they arrived, we boarded a surprisingly uncrowded tram and started making our way around the place.



**LEFT: Lee House – Arlington National Cemetery**

**RIGHT: Guard blocking off entrance to part of the cemetery near Tomb of the Unknowns**

Unfortunately several parts of Arlington Cemetery were inaccessible this morning. That was because the King and Queen of the Netherlands were visiting Washington, and they happened to be laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns together with President and Mrs. Obama. While the cemetery as a whole has virtually no security, understandably it was very tight in the immediate vicinity of the heads of state. There were guards at the entrance to the part of the cemetery where the Tomb of the Unknowns is located, and neither



**News photo of Maxima and Willem-Alexander at Arlington Cemetery**

vehicles nor pedestrians could enter. There were other areas that were restricted because military funerals were going on at the time we visited. If we'd had all day, we could have gone back later and seen the things we missed. Buschers chose to do that, but it really wasn't an option for the rest of the group. We did see Kennedy's grave, and we went through Robert E. Lee's home, something I hadn't done before. The biggest thing that stands out at Arlington Cemetery is how incredibly vast the place is. More than 400,000 people are buried there, and the number increases daily.

We took the tram back to the visitors center and said goodbye to the Buscher family. Then we went back to the metro and caught a train downtown. When we were here on Sunday we'd seen dozens of food trucks lining the street in front of the Smithsonian, and I thought it might be fun to have lunch there. When we exited at Federal Triangle station, though, I was completely disoriented and had no clue where the Smithsonian was in relation to where we were.

One of the kids saw a sign by a building near the metro plaza that said "Food court in basement", and that sounded like a decent idea for lunch. The place turned out to be the Ronald Reagan Building, which primarily houses the Department of Homeland Security. It was a bit odd going through security just to have lunch, but it turned out to be a good place to eat. They had many different options. The kids mostly chose places like Subway and Popeye's, but there were also lots of international quick food stands. I had chicken shawarma with rice and a Mediterranean salad, and it was delicious.

I was seven more clueless on where we were when we left the building, partly because we went out a different way than we had entered. Fortunately this is the smart phone age, and one of the kids quickly found how to get to our destination. I still get by with a "dumb" cell phone, and nine-tenths of the "apps" people use have no appeal to me at all. Having access to detailed maps on the go would be a good thing, though, and it's not that sort of thing that might make me eventually update my phone. **[As I noted before, I do have a modern smartphone now. I still prefer looking at online maps (and most other things) on a computer rather than a phone, but it is nice to have access to everything on the go.]**

Our destination was the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. I'd wanted to see this the year Margaret and I were in Washington at Christmas, but they were closed for the holidays during that visit. Normally visits to the BEP are arranged members of Congress, and after Senator Harkin was so helpful in arranging things for Margaret and me on the Christmas trip, I'd tried to contact both of our current senators and my Congressman for assistance with this one. Senator Ernst had a form on her website for arranging tours, but whoever designed that form forgot to put any instructions on how it should be returned. (You can tell she's a freshman senator.) I did manage to fill out the tour forms on both Senator Grassley's and Representative King's websites, but no one on either man's staff ever bothered to contact me—not even to acknowledge that they'd gotten the request. I've always rather liked Senator Grassley, but I must say my opinion of him went down after this experience. I'm embarrassed by the stupid things Congressman King is always saying, and not even getting back on a request from a school group certainly did nothing to ingratiate himself to me. It's odd that Senator Harkin's staff had been so helpful, but Grassley and King just seemed to completely ignore me.

**[I've grown to like Senator Grassley less and less over the years, and after his judiciary committee refused to even hold a hearing when President Obama nominated Merrick Garland for the Supreme Court and then rushed through the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett before President Trump lost re-election, I have pretty much no time for him at all. Steve King was defeated in the primary in his most recent bid for re-election, though his replacement is also ultra-conservative. Regardless of their politics, though, ignoring to even acknowledge a request from a school group is just ridiculous.]**

While the members of Congress were no help at all, I went to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing website and found a deeply buried section there that included a request for group tours. This is designed precisely for school groups, though they mostly cater with busloads of kids. With the Buschers counted, our group was just barely over their minimum size. It was easy and straightforward to request a tour that way, and I got a confirmation within two days of my request.

It's somewhat understandable that the Bureau of Engraving and Printing is a high security building. It was strange, though, to find that the public entrance was locked. I jiggled the handle and then went a bit further down the street looking for another entrance. Apparently jiggling the handle is what you're supposed to do, because a guy with a clipboard soon opened the door and asked if we were there for a tour. He soon found us on the list on his clipboard. I was a bit worried that our group was now significantly smaller than what had been confirmed (and technically below their minimum number), but he didn't seem to care about that at all. He marked us off and directed us to the metal detector.

We used the restroom and bought drinks from some machines in the lobby. We had to guzzle those quickly, though, because beverages were not allowed on the tour. Soon a group from Texas joined us, and the tour began.

The kids seemed to like the BEP tour, but I can't say I cared for it a lot. It was really very superficial. I understand why you can't actually see the printing presses up close or handle the stacks of money. I'd have liked to have learned a bit more about the actual process though. Instead a very bored young woman recited a few brief paragraphs as she ushered us along a catwalk. About the only

new thing I learned is that modern bills are actually printed twice, using two different printing methods. The non-green colors that are a major feature of modern money are done using offset printing like Daddy did at the AEA. The green and black use intaglio engraving, just as they always have.

They have a fairly nice (if very expensive) gift shop at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The thing you're supposed to buy is uncut bills (which technically aren't legal tender, because they haven't been "monetized" by the Fed). A couple of the kids did buy them, but I saw no need to spend twenty-five bucks for eight one-dollar bills (or equivalently more for higher denominations). Other kids bought bags of shredded money, the same thing they gave me for free at the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City. I picked up several postcards and a mug featuring the \$100,000 bill with Woodrow Wilson's portrait on it. Something I hadn't known before was that the \$100,000 included an early use of color on American money. The back of the bill was yellow, apparently signifying its status as a gold certificate.



**How tall are you in money?**

We took the metro one last time, riding from Smithsonian station back to the Pentagon. This time I made it very clear to the kids that I'd be paying their bus fare in cash. The driver found that odd, but he was perfectly willing to take my money. In retrospect, we probably could have just had the kids tap their cards. Since this was our last ride, negative balances wouldn't have mattered. I am generally honest about things, though, so we paid what was due.

We used the restroom at the Hilton and then headed out to the parking ramp. We had been told at the desk to use our room keys to exit the ramp, so we tried to do that. Apparently those keys became inactive at check-out time, though, because nothing happened when we put them in the gate. The attendant saw us fumbling and just raised the barrier manually without even checking the keys or asking for our room number. I'd bet anyone who happened to have a Hilton key could park there for free if they wanted to. Of course why they'd want to, I have no clue.

We left Alexandria around 1:30pm. Since it was still ahead of rush hour (which is surprisingly early in Washington), we had an easy drive out of the city. However, near Frederick, Maryland (which today is essentially the northern extent of the Baltimore—Washington metro area) we hit both heavy rain and heavy traffic. We came to a dead stop a couple of times, for no apparent reason at all. I think as much as anything people were just over-reacting to the rain. As we were stuck in traffic, I kept reciting in my head the old John Greenleaf Whittier poem "Barbara Fritchie", which is set in Frederick:

"Shoot if you must this old grey head,  
But spare your country's flag," she said

Sometime I'd like to actually stop and see the Fritchie house, not to mention all the other Civil War sites in the area. For now, though, my only connection to history would be silently reciting that poem while we were stuck in traffic in the sprawling suburb that is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Frederick.

We eventually made it through Frederick, and I was glad to see the mountains beyond there. We stopped for gas not far west of there, and then Deb and Jake drove through the mountains. Our next stop was for dinner. It was back in Morgantown, at the same exit where we'd had lunch on the way out to Washington.

Most of the group ate at McDonalds. I made the mistake of going back to Taco Bell. While the food was both good and cheap, the service was absurdly slow. It was after the rest of the group was already back in the suburbans that I finally got my food. I downed it in record time, and we were on our way again.

The kids had re-arranged the seating for the journey home. This was partially because Noah was no longer with us. I think the real reason, though, was so a group of them who wanted to play video games would be together. I happened to be in the vehicle that had the gamers, and it was more than a little annoying. The kids didn't really talk at all, but they'd periodically make sarcastic comments or add verbal sound effects to their games. The scenery in West Virginia and Pennsylvania was beautiful, but I can't say I really enjoyed the drive.

We made a brief stop at a rest area on the West Virginia border west of Wheeling. A bus of junior high kids arrived at the same time we did, and I was afraid this would be a slow stop. The chaperons had definitely whipped the middle-schoolers into shape, though. Those kids were all business at the rest area, and in fact the junior high bus left before we did.

For variety, instead of taking the beltway around Wheeling, we continued on I-70 right straight through the mountain city. The through-town route is notably shorter in miles, but it probably takes about the same time to drive as the bypass. That's because I-70 in West Virginia is a horribly archaic freeway built on impossibly little land with far too many exits. The speed limit gets down to 40mph in the downtown area, and it would be hard to drive much faster than that if you wanted to. Just before Exit 0, I-70 tunnels under a huge

mountain and then comes out right on the Ohio River bridge. It's actually kind of a fun road to drive, but not the sort of thing you do on auto-pilot.

Originally our destination tonight was supposed to be Springfield, Ohio, the same Comfort Suites where we'd stayed on our way out. Once the Bureau of Engraving and Printing confirmed an early afternoon tour, though, I knew that wasn't practical. I did quite a bit of searching, and the best of several less than ideal options was the Comfort Inn—Zanesville, a little over an hour west of Wheeling. We got there around 8:15, which was forty-five minutes ahead of the tentative schedule I'd put together. We probably could have continued on to Columbus, but the kids were fine with stopping in time to enjoy the hotel pool.

The Comfort Inn was an older motel, but it had been reasonably well maintained. It was however, most decidedly not worth the \$119 a night they charged. The bulk of the guests seemed to be construction workers, and I wondered if they were paying the same rate for a long-term stay. This was the most expensive place we stayed on this trip, significantly higher than the Hilton. It used to be that big city hotels were more expensive than rural ones, but these days the reverse is often true. I'm not sure why they think a night in Zanesville is worth more than one in Washington, but they do.

I can't say I cared a lot for Zanesville as a town. It's a lot like Ft. Dodge or Ottumwa—which is to say it's a rough and dirty place whose glory days were a century ago. Coming off the interstate, we were greeted by a make-shift sign telling us someone was desperate to sell their home for cash, and when we arrived at the hotel we found someone begging in the parking lot. He claimed he needed gas money, though if that's the case there's almost certainly some local group that would help him. In Algona the ministerial association has a fund for exactly that purpose, and my church contributes heavily to it. Surely there is something similar in Ohio.

We didn't give any money to the guy, but Jake and I did go out to gas up the suburbans after we got settled in. While we were there, an ambulance came rushing through the lot in front of the gas station. It had come from a Wendy's next door. I don't know if someone choked or had a heart attack or what, but I do hope things turned out all right.

Jake and I talked a bit more, and I did some more reading. Eventually, though, we turned out the lights and called it a night.

## **Tuesday, June 2**

### **Zanesville, Ohio to Alsona, Iowa**

This was a long day! It's more than 800 miles from eastern Ohio to northern Iowa, about as far as I'd ever want to drive in a day. While there was frequent construction, it was mostly pretty easy driving, and we made good time.

We left Zanesville around 8:00 and headed west to Columbus. Again it was right at rush hour, but traffic moved right along on the beltway. Only at the far west edge, where we re-joined I-70, was there any back-up at all.

Our first stop of the day was at a rest area about twenty miles west of Columbus. Just after we left we saw the black suburban pull off the road, which bothered us a bit. All the school vehicles used to have CB radios, but there's not one in the Traverse. So, Deb got on her cell phone and called to see what was up. Apparently there was a door that wasn't entirely closed, and they had to take care of that. Soon we were both on our way without incident.

It was fairly easy to recognize the black suburban as we drove today. That was because one of the daytime running lights had burnt out. The actual headlight worked fine, but the extra-dim visibility light on the driver's side was out. While it needed to be fixed when we got back to Algona, it actually made it easier to make out which vehicle was ours on the highway.

We stopped for lunch at the east edge of Indianapolis, at the same exit where we'd stopped on the outbound trip. Instead of Wendy's, this time we pulled into Burger King—not my favorite food, but different from the choices in Algona. We chose to take the north beltway around Indianapolis, and that worked like a charm. While there were malls and office parks all around us, we didn't slow down once. The only problem we'd had in Indianapolis was that I'd made a typo when I wrote out directions for the trip. I'd said the beltway was I-470, when in fact it's I-465. We made all the turns without a problem, but I was never 100% sure we were on the right road.

We continued west to Danville, Illinois, just beyond the state border. We stopped there for gas and were pleased to gain an hour with the switch back to Central Time. Deb drove most of the way across Illinois. I picked up a couple of papers in Danville, and pretty much read them cover to cover as we made our way past Bloomington, Champaign, and Peoria.

We stopped at a rest area near Galesburg (though I don't think the twin of the one we'd been to heading out) and then continued northward to the Quad Cities. For variety we stayed on I-80 this time, rather than taking the western bypass on I-280. The distances are pretty much identical, but I-280 spends more time in Illinois, while I-80 enters Iowa more quickly. I personally like I-280 better, mostly because it has a gorgeous bridge over the Mississippi. The I-80 bridge is old and narrow, but it was still good to cross it and feel that we were really approaching home.

Again today the kids filled almost the entire day playing video games on their phones and I-pads. I'd go stark raving mad if I had to do that all day, but apparently it's fun to them. I suppose I should be happy they were so easily entertained, but I must say it made the trip deadly dull for the driver.



**Playing video games in on the trip home**

The black suburban made a quick stop at a rest area west of the Quad Cities, but we continued on to our next scheduled break. That was at 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in Cedar Rapids. We bought gas at a Casey's there (the cheapest gas we'd see on this trip) and had dinner at the Wendy's next door. Then we headed north on Avenue of the Saints to Waterloo and Charles City.



**Congratulations, Anthony Kollasch!**

stops had apparently added another hour and a half. That's really not that bad for such a long trip. While it's among the latest arrival times we've had, it could have been far worse.

In competition we went from our best showing ever last year to one of the worst this time around. It was still an honor to play at nationals, though, and the trip was a good one. There seem to be a lot of good kids coming up from the junior high level, so perhaps in another couple of years we'll be competitive once again. **[We'd continue to go to nationals annually through 2020, when the pandemic switched things to a virtual competition. They're doing things online in 2021 as well, but this is likely to be the first time in many years we won't be participating. We do have some good freshmen in quiz bowl, though, so hopefully we'll be back at nationals in another year or two.]**

Our final stop was at McDonalds in Clear Lake. While I got a smoothie and a few of the kids got some snacks, mostly this was a toilet break. Pretty much everyone wanted to make the stop quick, because with just forty-five minutes to go, we were all antsy to get home.

As we reached the east edge of Algona, we were greeted by the face of one of our players. Tony Kollasch had recently been awarded a major scholarship to attend Briar Cliff University, and the college was advertising that fact on a billboard. As a private school, we'll occasionally put up billboards advertising Garrigan, so it's not unheard of for our students to have their picture in advertising. Those are almost always group shots, though, designed to include as many different people as possible. "Anthony" (as the sign, but not even his mother, called him) is the only person I've ever known to be featured solo in outdoor advertising, though.

It was shortly before 9:00 when we got back to Algona. Online mapping services say it's 11½ hours of driving time between Zanesville and Algona, so our

