

Ormand Family Activity

June 2012: Five-State Tour

The original plan for this summer was not to do much, maybe see some local things like Organ Pipe or some Santa Cruz County ghost towns or things like that, or maybe do the Route 66 tour through northern Arizona, and save up the money. Given how things in our world are moving, having some liquidity seems smart. However,

- My Uncle David and Aunt Judy are celebrating their 50th anniversary this year
- My Aunt Yvonne is trying to sell her house on the farm and move into town, and this may be the last year we can visit her out there
- My American Airlines frequent-flyer miles are due to expire this year

Besides, we've been talking about visiting Branson for some time now.

So with the sense of adventure overwhelming the sense of prudence, I buy the tickets (to extend, not use, the frequent-flyer miles; we will use those to visit the East Coast... someday), and we start doing some research and requesting visitors guides and lining up hotels. Our plans are not without external influence:

- Branson: My cousin Patty's family had told us of their visiting Branson frequently, and I vaguely knew it wasn't all that far from Pryor
- Springfield, Illinois: Jerri is supposedly tenuously related to Abraham Lincoln, and she is on a "tour presidential sites" kick anyways
- Iowa: The lady that we have a weekly prayer time with came from Iowa, and has told us of the Amana Colonies in glowing terms
- St. Louis: For *years* of living in Ohio and taking summer trips to see family in Oklahoma and Arizona, we would drive straight through (or past) St. Louis, and I can remember pressing my little nose and hands against the car window, watching the great Arch slide by. WE WOULD NEVER STOP! (Well, we did once, just for pictures; an unsatisfying experience). It's payback time!

Saturday June 2: Hurst, Texas

Finally the end of May arrives; Faith is back from her "last hurrah" with her senior classmates on a trip to Disneyland, the desired Branson shows are identified (with some surprises), the hotel reservations are made, the cat-and-house sitter is lined up... and we are up past midnight packing the bags. Four, you know; you pay for your bags on the airplane, and you pay *more* for extra bags. Like always, we are late leaving the house, all my margin is gone, we waste time trying out a cheaper parking lot that turns out is already full, and we arrive at Tucson International with scant minutes to spare. But we succeed in getting to the counter in time, even though we have to redistribute the contents of the suitcases a bit in order to get them all below the 50-pound limit (or get charged extra), and through security and a last visit to the restroom, and walk up to the gate where they're already calling out our names (but WE aren't the last ones on board!).

Now we can relax a bit. Jerri has a window seat, and Charity and Faith are right behind us, playing cards on the two-hour trip to Dallas-Fort Worth. We arrive at DFW, get to the National rental car place, and leave in a nice red Impala (with memories of the rental car collision adventure in Atlanta several years back still circulating in my head). I have brought my little Garmin GPS navigator, so it gets stuck on the windshield right out of the National garage, but it isn't strictly necessary; I've been to Hurst before, it's just down 183/121 east of DFW. I just need a little help finding the church, but neither I nor the GPS navigator were prepared for all the construction on the freeway.

As it is, we arrive a little later than we had hoped, and just in time for a performance by the Singing Herrings. Doug can actually play the guitar and sing. My closest cousin, Scott, his brother, has at least set down the Guitar Hero controller he was holding earlier, and their dad, Uncle David, has joined the impromptu performance. Soon, mercifully, they are done, and after some introductions by my dad who is also here, the people in the room break up for greetings and conversations and hijinks by the older kids.





Aunt Judy and Uncle David after 50 years of marriage.

There are as many or more Herring family members as Ormands, but the latter are well-represented. The Ruth McMahon contingent from the Tulsa area, Uncle Bill and his family. The Glen Ormand group from the Canyon, Texas, and the Panhandle, notably Aunt Roxie and two of her three girls and their families. Aunt Yvonne from Pryor, Oklahoma. Judy and David's sons, including Scott's family from Mississippi. And of course the Lowell Ormand group from Tucson.

Charity renews her connection with Cassidy Watts. Hopefully they will maintain it better now that they are both adults. Cassidy's dad Jody is visiting off in the background.



Sunday June 3: Plano, Texas

Eventually the party at the church breaks up, and a subset resorts to David and Judy's Hurst home for informal dinner and additional gabbing. The next day is Sunday, and after attending the worship service at First Baptist Hurst (which includes clips from the Christian cartoonist Johnny Hart's "BC" strip), a convoy is set up to drive across the metroplex to Plano, where David's car-dealer brother Don lives in an impressive house by the golf course, and where Don is holding a catered dinner in honor of his brother's 50th anniversary. It was a pleasant event, marred only by news of Don's mother-in-law who was seriously ill in the hospital and died while the dinner party was under way. Later that evening, we meet with Jerri's sister Maribeth and her husband Bob Nottingham at a diner outside the Grapevine Mills Mall. I would have liked to walk through this notably large shopping mall, but we arrived too late, and it was approaching midnight before we left, and Bob and Maribeth undertook the hour-plus drive back to Commerce, well east of Dallas on the other side.

Monday June 4: BEP and Grapevine, Texas

Monday was expected to be an adventure on the train that runs between downtown Grapevine and the Fort Worth Stockyards... but we learned that the train runs Thursday through Sunday. So instead, we take mommy's suggestion of seeing the Fort Worth Mint instead.



Which we learn isn't really the Mint. The Mint is where coins are struck; what happens at Fort Worth is bills are printed. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing

(www.moneyfactory.gov) set up the western operation at Fort Worth to share the burden that was overwhelming the original plant in the DC

area. The tour is free, even if the plant is in remote Blue Mound north of the actual Fort Worth city, and popular to the point that, even on a working Monday, the tour groups were almost unmanageably large. You could enjoy the sight of a different kind of factory but with the same kinds of industrial electronic controls and automation (even robots!) and production flows, like the yours-truly geek, or just the idea of millions of dollars of currency being generated just through the glass of the sound-proof touring galleries above the factory floor. We learned many things, such as the little "FW" on the face of the bills that are produced at this plant, or the star next to the serial number indicating that a backup sheet had replaced a defective sheet after the automatic serial numbers were applied. We learned that the newly-printed bills are not actually, officially *money* until they are delivered to the vault in the destination Federal Reserve Bank (who are actually the "customers" for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing) and their serial numbers registered in the system - I think that's a distinction without a difference, as even a stolen pack of \$20s would go a long ways without anybody actually checking serial numbers! We found that the hand-operated "spider" printing presses (so named for the large eight-handled wheel for operating the press) used way back before automatic presses are still in use for specialty things like commemorative certificates and invitations to presidential inaugurations. I was mildly surprised that they don't do stamps (they used to, particularly the revenue stamps on liquor bottle caps). And Faith was intrigued by an interesting career opportunity: The Bureau has a "damaged currency" department that will forensically dissect the remains of ruined stashes of money brought in by people (it's a free service) who will receive the equivalent in new cash for the best estimated value. Maybe Faith the careful crafty person will be investigating piles of moldy or charred federal bills someday!

After leaving the BEP, we still have the afternoon, so we bypass the mess on 183/121 and crawl up through all the little townships on state highway 26 to Grapevine - and catch more construction.

The car is ditched next to a funeral home. Which turns out to be historic. And has an interesting display of 19th Century funerary accoutrements and embalming equipment. When Faith is not busily snapping pictures of caskets, she is clowning for her sister.



Historic Downtown Grapevine looks like any other little Texas town. You couldn't guess that Grapevine is one of the more significant cities in the metroplex, or that the DFW Airport is inside the Grapevine city limits. We look into several of the shops - overpriced clothes and "antique" knick-knacks, mostly

(although Faith almost got some Samba party sleeves she found in one place), and they pretty much all closed between 5 and 6, so we didn't get into most of them. The unavailable candy/ice cream place was my disappointment.

Faith finds a friend outside a flea market mall.



Charity gets rather too familiar with a bronze man outside the former bank (now visitors center, also closed). There were several of these bronze life-size statues about, to give a feel for mid-twentieth century Grapevine, when Grapevine was the downtown area.

The sisters wait in a pleasant urban park for mommy to come out of the restroom. The little park is edged with ramadas, so I guess this is the scene for birthdays, municipal celebrations, farmers' markets, and other such events.



The little park includes a "Founders' Park" area with a representative two-room cabin and a wind turbine. A sign explains where "Grapevine" came from - the original settlers found wild grapes here. The turbine might have actually been pumping water, as it was trickling into a trough marked "Whoa! For horses only!"

Right across from the park is the impressive Grapevine City Hall.



Which is topped by a cupola with a lantern-bearing cowboy. Where else but Texas? No, that's not fair; Tucson has its silliness as well, like the horse on the porch roof of the OK Feed and Supply Store, or the neon saguaro on Miracle Mile near Drachman Street. Even so, most of our oddments are on the City Council.

Appropriately, Charity experiences the diminutive Grapevine jail. Not inside the marshall's office, like you might expect from the movies, even though Grapevine did have a marshall. We've seen other places like that, such as the jail at Jerome that slid down the hillside under the influence of the blasts in the mine underneath the mountain.



The downtown area along Main Street is still growing. We have come out of a kiddie furniture store (why did we go in there?) that was just closing, part of a number of shops on the east side of the street, and on the other side is a block of historic buildings being renovated for commercial operation.

Faith notices an occupant of the corner tower. I'm sure there's a story here...



At this point, we've seen enough of Historic Downtown Grapevine to get a pretty good feel for it, so we collect the car and head down Main Street toward the highway 121 mess back to Hurst, for another informal family dinner at David and Judy's and to say our goodbyes. On the way out, we stop at the railroad terminal, just to look at the open rail cars we *would*

have been on had they been operating today. On the balance, though, I think we did better seeing the BEP today.

Tuesday June 5: Denison to Tulsa

Most of today will be spent on the road with Patty and Yvonne going back to Oklahoma. On the way is the first of our five presidential sites - the Eisenhower birthplace in Denison, Texas. As we approach the town on US Route 75 from the south, I've got my eyes peeled for a brown

"Eisenhower Historical Site" sign... but I don't see one, and then we're past the last Denison exit. Turning around back southbound... there it is. So it's marked for people coming *into* Texas, but not for those *leaving*. Huh.

Downtown Denison is quite alive, with the street-level storefronts occupied by antique shops and flea markets. We don't have the time to explore, but it looks like Denison might be a good place for a day of knick-knack hunting.



Once you get into the town, the circuitous route to the Eisenhower house is well-marked. Soon we are at the visitors center, looking at the photos on the wall and a short video of the life of one of America's greatest soldiers. I never connected President Eisenhower with the Interstate highway system, but it seems he recognized the need early in his military career, when he encountered turn-of-the-century roads as part of a cross-country convoy. It seems his father, David Eisenhower (Dwight was actually "David Dwight", but he grew up with his given names switched to distinguish him from his father) was in Denison only temporary, working with the MKT Railroad as an "engine scrubber" (never heard of this before; it seems the coal-fired locomotives needed to have the flammable dust washed off them, a hot and dirty job), until he got back on his feet and moved the family to Abilene, Kansas.

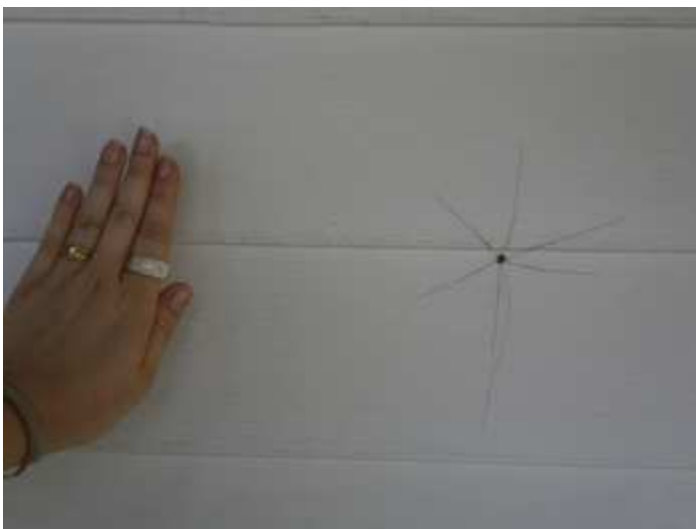


Which means the birthplace house is significant only because Denison and Ike made it so. It is in fact a state park, not a National Historical Site; not that this makes any difference for the excellent condition of the house and park.

This was a "modest" house! We could have paid admission and seen the inside, but it seems the staff

was occupied by a bus tour (which we never saw, nor was the house filled with anybody, much less a tour group). But we achieved our real goal, to have been here and taken some photos.

The MKT rails originally ran right by their house. Hence the "modest", I suppose; not a very desirable location. There was a proper neighborhood, but some time ago, all the other houses had been abandoned and torn down and the property incorporated into the state park.



Charity and Faith discover an unusually large "daddy longlegs spider" on the wall of the kitchen. The house is sort of a "T" shape, with the living rooms facing the street and the kitchen out the back.

We visit the statue with its inspirational messages on the base before leaving.



On the way back out of town, we are looking for a place for lunch, as it's already late and we are hungry. I was quite expecting some of the storefronts to be occupied by cafes, but no - everything is antique shops or local businesses. But just after the "strip", we find the Jones Family Barbeque, of the classic "get your food at the counter and take it to

your table" variety. Very good, and the girl from the counter kept coming out with more rolls.

Back on the road, we proceed north across the Red River into Oklahoma, stopping briefly for Braum's ice cream at Henryetta. Then we bend eastward on the tollroad and enter Tulsa from the south. As we pick our way through the freeways toward the east side where Patty lives, a phone call comes from the car whose taillights we are

struggling to follow: Why don't we just go to Gardner's Used Book Store while Patty and Yvonne pick up some chicken for dinner. So we do. Gardner's is an amazing place, along the lines of Bookman's in Tucson (and now Phoenix and Flagstaff), with ad-hoc bookshelves built all over a rambling store and cardboard placards marking the genres. Tables outside under the porch are heaped with the 25-cent discount books, which apparently stay outside, with an honor-system coin drop for after-hours browsers. A promotional Incredible Hulk is just inside the door. A large room is committed to graphic novels and comic books, and used CD and video media. Wonderful place, but I can't help but think that we will spend more money getting the books we purchase back to Tucson than we spent on the books themselves!

Eventually we've had enough, and take our prizes back to Patty's house, where we dine on fried chicken and watermelon and look at pictures of her grandchildren. After a few hours of visiting, we bid her goodbye, and leave Tulsa, following Yvonne's car through Chouteau and Pryor and out to the farm. The evening is spent with Aunt Yvonne playing Chickenfoot Dominoes.

Wednesday June 6: Pryor

The next morning is spent looking around the farm buildings. Particularly the barn, where a family of semi-wild cats live. The mommy cat has had a litter of kittens, and Charity and Faith are searching for them.





There's one! We count the mommy and two kittens. Of course, they refuse to be approached by humans, so we have to be content with seeing them peek at us fearfully.

Uncle Bob's propane tractor, still an object of fascination, even for big kids.



Charity is ready for her vaccinations.

Walking around the outside of the barn, we see two cows and two calves in a fenced area of the pasture. The gate of the area is open, and at the sight of strange people, the animals start running off to join the rest of the herd. Except one of the calves doesn't



understand the open gate business, and gets trapped between the threatening humans and the fence, and is frantically running back and forth to get to the two cows who have now turned back to "help" the terrified baby. We retreat back to the gravel courtyard and watch through the corral fence. Eventually the silly little creature gets walked back down and through the open gate.



Later in the day, Yvonne has some appointments, so we take her nephew Slade with us for a visit to the town of Pryor. Even though it seems the area is doing okay economically, the main street is not. We peek into "Mary's What-Not Shop", next to the auto parts place, next to a disreputable-looking used video game and DVD shop. Across the street, a community church

occupies a storefront. We stop at the bookstore. That's about it; most of the other storefronts are boarded over. The Allred movie theatre is still open, and seems to have acquired an adjacent property for an expansion, but it's not easy to see how this works. Somewhat depressing.

Then Slade guides us around town to see the houses that his mother, Mandy, is looking to buy with the proceeds from the sale of the farmhouse. This tour includes a mansion by one of Pryor's better-off citizen. I never really imagined Pryor as having "mansions", but it seems there is a spectrum of prosperity in the town. We also have a look at the duplex which Yvonne intends to rent.

Later on, after hanging around Whitaker Park, near Grandpa's croquet court, we connect back up with Yvonne who is finished with her appointments. We suggest seeing Grandpa and Grandma's grave, so she guides us to the cemetery, where, in addition to what we went to see, we also look at some Jackson graves. And we learn something amazing: I always thought Uncle Bob's name was... Bob. As in *Robert*. It's "Bob" on their marriage license. But it was "Harold Dwayne" on his birth certificate!



That evening, we go to the best barbeque ever: JL's.



Thursday June 7: Joplin, Carthage, and Branson

The next day, we say goodbye to Yvonne and Slade, sitting on the porch of the house for which she just that morning accepted an offer. The road to Branson goes through Joplin, so we take the opportunity to step off the road and look at it.



The damage from the terrible tornado strike of last year is still visible, but new buildings are going up all over. The path of the tornado's destruction lay between the freeway and the nice downtown area that escaped any injury. But we didn't really have time to look around Joplin much,

because we have to see something just next door in Carthage.

Namely, the Precious Moments Chapel, the inland empire created by the artist who created the sad-eyed children characters.



www.preciousmomentschapel.org



Inside the Visitors Center are a gift shop and a cafe and "Small World" type dioramas of sad-eyed children and animals.

It's amazing, really. A tribute to the marketing cleverness of Art Butcher the artist and the appeal of sentimental "Christian" art items. Several of the displays are animated - a sad-eyed carpenter hammers unendingly on a roofing nail.





Outside is the path to the chapel, with beautifully landscaped grounds, statues and planters, and another fountain of sad-eyed angels wearing dinner plates on their heads.

Yes, the family at the imposing Precious Moments Chapel.





Inside the "nave" are a series of paintings of Bible stories and parables featuring sad-eyed child Bible characters. Naked sad-eyed cupids fly around on the ceiling. The focus wall behind the "altar" is a portrayal of what Heaven might be like in sad-eyed sentimental terms.

It isn't clear that this chapel is actually used for anything. Apparently there is a wedding chapel elsewhere on the grounds. There is a small stage under the "Heaven" picture, and A/V outlets on the wall beneath it.

Through the doors on either side are galleries with Precious Moments stained

glass pictures, and examples of the merchandise produced over the years. Art's life and family are portrayed in photos and narrative signs. A smaller chapel pays tribute to the Butcher son who died as a young man, and to other instances of grief and loss and the families who drew comfort from the sad-eyed Precious Moments artwork.

We are visiting the Chapel with a pack of Methodists wearing yellow "Disaster Relief" shirts; obviously a church group come to serve in the rebuilding of Joplin. As we leave, we see a few of them posing for photos with an older man who is being attended by a staff member with a golf cart. Turns out... that was Art Butcher himself!

Through the trees and down in a little Ozark valley is this little castle. Nobody is there; unclear if it is accessible or not. Pretty, though.





On the hillside on the other side of the property, above a little (probably artificial) stream with waterfalls, is a resurrection diorama, with a sad-eyed angel outside a muddy-looking cave.

It was impressive on a number of levels: The success and influence of a man who committed his art to God. The church that saw a man saved, but had to leave the disciple-making to a para-church ministry like Child Evangelism Fellowship. The market power of emotion and sentimentality in "Christian America". But we will see more of this on this trip.

Our visit to the Precious Moments Chapel is complete. Carthage is supposed to have a very nice downtown area also, but we don't have time to check it out, because we have to lay some miles down. On to Springfield. Around Springfield to the south (we will return in a few days). South toward Branson. On the way, in Ozark, is the famous restaurant Lambert's, known for the method of serving dinner rolls by throwing them at you. No time. Big billboards all along this south-bound route proclaim the acts and attractions just ahead. Excitement is mounting. Then we arrive, get off the highway... and join a long, slow queue of cars trying to get into downtown Branson. That is our destination, since we have to visit the Travel Office and pick up our tickets to the shows we have already reserved. Eventually, we get there and find a parking place near the Travel Office. What we learn is that the main road through Branson, highway 76, also known as "The Strip", is highly congested, and three alternative routes have been established to get around: the Blue, the Red, and the Yellow routes.

Now, ordinarily when we travel, we make reservations at hotels along the way. For the most part, this is ideal, if somewhat expensive, since we don't usually stay but one or two days in a place, but we intend to stay in Branson for four nights. Now, my step-mother owns a timeshare interest, and has offered to let us use her rights at the Wyndham resort here. The resort is on the Yellow Route, which runs south of town, and

that is our second stop. We check in and get the key to the apartment, which turns out to be Very Nice - two rooms, two baths, a full kitchen and laundrette, a gas fireplace (it doesn't take long for us to learn that Branson is a VERY POPULAR Christmas destination), and...

a patio deck/balcony which overlooks the golf course. There was a gas grill out there, to complement the kitchen equipment, and a patio table with four chairs. Perfect! Later this night, when people had gotten ready for bed and the room was quiet, I was hearing a faint noise like an overloaded motor. I was mildly concerned, but decided to ignore it. The



next night, I happened to step out on the balcony in the dark, and I discovered that the noise was coming from outside, just muffled by the glass door - the nearby water feature on the golf course must be the home of a colony of frogs, who were setting up an impressive din!

Before we left on this trip, part of our resesarch was to check out the attractions in the Branson area. There's a lot of information on the Web, and two sites that helped us the most were

- www.branson.com
- www.explorebranson.com

Our going-in position is that Jerri, Charity, and Faith can each pick a show for us to see each night we are there. My preference is to engage in some of the outdoor activities, particularly like a swim in one of the numerous lakes, or a forest hike, or some such. As it turns out, we never had time for this sort of thing; maybe this could be part of a return visit someday.



Jerri's choice is on for tonight - the Shoji Tabuchi Show (www.shoji.com). Shoji is an expert violinist, classically trained, but was inspired in a life-changing way when Roy Acuff and the Smoky Mountain Boys appeared in his Japanese city on a tour. He was so impressed that he emigrated, and learned how to play country tunes both violin and fiddle style. He has since established himself in Branson with his own theatre and a small

band and a troupe of dancers and singers. Ordinarily, his wife and daughter perform with him, but they are absent, so an obviously pregnant lady named Alicia sings solos and duets. We hear the iconic fiddle tune "Orange Blossom Special" for the first of many times from Shoji's violin, followed by songs of the '50s and '60s, Broadway Show tunes, some New Orleans-style jazz, and of course a variety of country songs, new and old. Shoji is a great showman - the "Orange Blossom Special" starts off as a toy train chugging across the stage; a flashing disco mirror ball drops from the ceiling for one of the acts, a giant jukebox opens up and out steps Shoji; and for just about every act, he is wearing a different sequined jacket. Sometimes he changes it on stage. Once it is covered in pineapples. It was a great show.

Made more memorable for me; I sat next to a man eager for conversation before the show who explained he was a surgeon from West Hollywood, and he had quite a list of celebrity friends and acquaintances like Caroline Cotton (www.carolinacotton.org). At one point (when I could get a word in), I asked him what his opinion was of the economic condition of his precious California. He either didn't understand the question or doesn't have an opinion, as he told me that California could be anything a person wanted. I take it that he represents a broad class of well-to-do Californians who are not directly affected by the impending bankruptcy of the state and are not inclined to change the way things are.

Now, the show isn't all there is to see. The Shoji Tabuchi Theatre is also famous for the "million dollar restrooms". In addition to the amazingly appointed lavatories and fixtures, there were other unique features. The ladies room had an attendant to direct visitors to empty stalls. The men's room had a pool table, and a staff "pro" who would play with you, and a gallery of chairs if you wanted to watch the game (or just the pro knocking the balls around the table).



Before and especially after the show, we experienced the spectacle of Branson at night. The "Strip" is just packed with attractions, not only the theatres of the various regular groups, but ice cream stands ("Andy's" was famous, and packed with patrons at night), several miniature golf courses, a huge mockup of the Titanic bow, an elevated go-cart track, restaurants (such as the famous Dixie Stampede, or the one with the giant chicken standing outside), and hotels (like the one with the indoor water park). All lit up at night with neon and flashing bulbs. It's like a family-friendly Las Vegas on hillsides stretched along a winding road. Beautiful and fascinating.

Friday June 8: Branson Landing



The next day starts, for Jerri the Lawrence Welk Show fan, with a visit to the Welk Resort. Not that there's any sort of Lawrence Welk or big band show there (although a few Welk Show veterans return to Branson for seasonal appearances), just for the sake of saying she was here.

Although there is a display case with some Lawrence Welk paraphernalia. Mostly there's a buffet-style restaurant (we don't go) and a gift shop (we do go), and a great number of families of adopted Chinese orphans - some sort of convention.





Today is a shopping day. There are gift and craft stores *everywhere*, standalone or inside theatres or malls. Grand Village is a collection of shops and cafes, sort of an open-air mall. Mommy spends a great deal of time inside Kringle's, the largest Christmas goodies store we have ever seen. There's a clock shop with several grandfather's clocks and the largest "Black Forest" style cuckoo clock we could ever have imagined. There are many other interesting shops, including ones with clothes that are too pricey for even Charity's tastes. And a giant rocking chair.

We continue on down to downtown Branson, and dump the car pretty much where we parked it yesterday afternoon. The Downtown district includes a steep hill that runs down toward the "lake" (which being so long and narrow, might as well be a river), and on that hill are some flea market shops. We visit these on the way back up, but right now, people are hungry for lunch. The road down the hill crosses the tracks of the excursion train (another fun thing we won't have time to do) and into Branson Landing. Now, I had read that Branson Landing was a collection of shops, but as we enter, it becomes obvious that it is an outdoor mall, with exactly the same kind of shops as any mall, such as Park Place or Tucson Mall back home.

We get lunch, and then as Charity and Faith hang about some of the mall-ish shops, Jerri and I go down the steps to the "Landing", where there's a big fountain. Every hour after noon, the fountain does a little musical



show, with the water jets choreographed to the music, rather like the Bellagio Fountain in Las Vegas, just not as grand. It's still very nice, and after dark it might even be spectacular under colored lights. But we have plans that will keep us away from Branson Landing in the evenings.



There is perhaps one aspect of Branson Landing that is seriously different than Park Place - one of the "anchor stores" is a Bass Pro Shop. These are legendary outdoor or sporting equipment stores especially in the midwest. There's a big one in Grapevine, between the Mall and the DFW airport, which is the first time I ever heard about it. The one here in Branson is "small" by

comparison.

But it still has the over-the-top grand dioramas and freshwater aquariums that the Bass Pro Shops are famous for. Above the large tank with huge game fish is a hill with waterfalls and deer, elk, and bears standing around. A water mill turns slowly under the flow of the stream. A flock of geese fly under the rafters. Amazing.



I did stop by the firearms department, just to check - yes, they carry British .303. Charity notices "Zombie Ammunition". I think these are rounds that are defective but safe (uncertified ballistics), so they are sold at discount.

The day is wearing on, and the shopping part of it is over. We get out of downtown by other means than the "Strip", and just west of the city is the Shepherd of the Hills complex. On Sunday evening, we will be back here for the actual "Shepherd of the Hills" outdoor drama, which is primarily a story of the out-of-control



"Baldknobbers" vigilante bands that plagued the Ozark mountains long after the Civil War.

(In preparation for the trip, we rented the movie "Shepherd of the Hills", starring John Wayne. In the movie version, it is primarily about the moonshiners and revenooers, which it seems is *nothing* like the book. In fact, the premier screening of the film was right here in Branson, and the locals proudly went into the theatre. Very shortly afterwards they started leaving the theatre, disgusted with the "artistic license" that had been taken with their beloved story. Interestingly, the author was Harold Bell Wright... who apparently had something to do with Tucson, as the housing subdivision southeast of Speedway and Wilmot is the "Harold Bell Wright Estates"!)



But that will be Sunday. This afternoon, it is the Sons of the Pioneers, the legendary cowboy singing group founded by Roy Rogers back in the '30s, and a "chuckwagon dinner" beforehand. After we are seated, a tour bus rolls up and disgorges a load of older folk from Nebraska. Fortunately they are mostly well-behaved, and we enjoy our grilled chicken, cornbread, and

"whistleberries" (cowboy beans) and apple cobbler with endless refills of lemonade or sweet tea. I supposed that, had my family actually gone to the "Triple C Chuckwagon Dinner and Show" when the Sons of the

Pioneers were operating out of Tucson, it would have been very similar to this.

After dinner, the Sons of the Pioneers came out and sang their trademark songs in their trademark male harmony. The lead singer with the guitar was very good, and the young man at the left end of the stage was the "champion fiddler of Missouri". During the intermission, we had the opportunity to go



up front and talk to the performers (and get their autographs on our souvenir photo), at which time I learned that none of them were in the group when it was in Tucson, except maybe for the old fellow in the middle, Lester, with whom I did not get the chance to speak much. Lester is the "trail boss", having been with the group the longest, 40 years. The Sons of the Pioneers (www.sonsofthepioneers.org) have perpetuated by adding new talent as old members retire. It was a fine show, enhanced by the awareness of the connection with Tucson.

After the Sons of the Pioneers dinner and show were over, we had to make tracks to get to Faith's choice, the Shanghai Acrobats. What? Chinese acrobats in the Country Music Capital? Yes, and they were as amazing as the Peking Acrobats that we had seen on board the General Jackson riverboat in Nashville some years before. After the show, the artists - who could speak little to no English - were herded out front of the theatre to meet the audience. Odd. The interesting discovery was how short these young adults were! Inspired, Faith got a Chinese yo-yo; she has yet to master the device. Before the main show, the theatre had provided the stage to a troupe of young American girl cheerleaders, "Kelly's Kuties", who did baton twirling and other choreographed demonstrations of coordination and skill. Well... let's just say, they weren't quite as good as their Chinese counterparts.

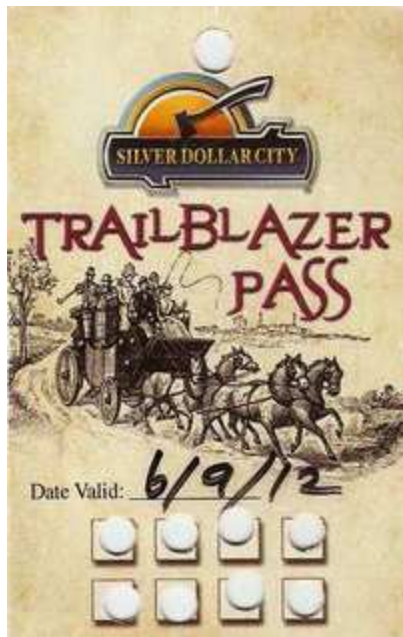
(Also interesting was, these acrobats are from Shanghai - *Red China*! I would expect that some means are in place to prevent defections.

Maybe PLA guards in the dorm? Relatives back home held hostage?)

After the show, we pick up some sandwiches for dinner, take them back to the apartment, and sit on the deck or balcony to eat them. The noise from the frogs and the cicadas in the trees is deafening. We note that the golf course has a paved track (for the carts), and a few people are doing their evening walk or jog on the track, and everytime they approach the water trap, the frogs cease their singing. We also notice a black cat on the course near the rough on the other side, obviously hunting. In the gathering dusk - *fireflies!* A thoroughly enjoyable end to a wonderful day.

Saturday June 9: Silver Dollar City

One of the primary features of the Branson area we have heard from our Oklahoma kin is the Silver Dollar City amusement park (www.bransonsilverdollarcity.com), and this is one of our primary reasons for the visit. We are unprepared, however, for the bumper-to-bumper creep that starts just outside the city and proceeds for five miles to the park entrance. Once inside, they have the parking organized pretty well, and there are shuttles to take visitors to the gate. With our pre-bought tickets, we are soon inside. They have an interesting twist on Disneyland; instead of having the visitors go past a gauntlet of shops, SDC has visitors going *through* the shop!



While we are going through, we pick up four Trailblazer passes. Similar to "Flash Pass" at Disneyland (no extra charge) and the cool little wireless gadget at Six Flags, the Trailblazer allows you to bypass the line at eight specific attractions. Even at \$25 each, this was well worth the price.



Some of the Trailblazer rides, all of us can handle. These include

- **American Plunge:** Log ride, pretty good, but with features to intentionally get you wet (the plastic screens at the bottom of the final "plunge" deflect the splash back into the log boat). We did this first, and were damp for a couple of hours.
- **Thunderation:** Relatively mild "train" style roller coaster, no loops or steep drops, similar to Disneyland's Thunder Mountain Railroad but without the interesting fake "desert" scenery.
- **Fire in the Hole:** Akin to Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean, but instead of pirates, the scenes which the little boats float through are about southern Missouri's historic vigilante villains, the baldknobbers.
- **Lost River of the Ozarks:** Roaring Rapids style ride, with the round inner tube boat that gets carried along through eddies and waterfalls. Large volumes of water sloshes over the edge and between the seats. Another ride intended to maximize wetness.

Some of the Trailblazer rides are too vigorous for Mommy. While we go on these, Mommy looks around the shops, or in one instance, she goes

to the "Opera House" to see a circus show featuring the fellow who recently walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope!

- [Wildfire](#): Coaster of the sort where the riders are suspended under the track, and executes several 360-degree loops. Pretty good.
- [PowderKeg](#): Pretty fast steel coaster that starts off at a high acceleration, then climbs an almost vertical rise, followed by an almost vertical drop. Exhilarating! Perhaps better than Knott's Berry Farm's Accelerator.
- [The Giant Swing](#): Motorized pendulum with a l-o-n-g arm. In about three swings, it is almost straight out parallel with the ground. Sounds simple, but it's a really great ride! We went on this twice.

The other Trailblazer "ride" we decided was pretty lame, Tom & Huck's RiverBlast, which involved little flatbottom "riverboats" slowly moving along a water course, with each person controlling a water cannon to squirt people (not on the ride) who could control ground-mounted water cannon to squirt the people on the ride. It seemed pretty pointless except as an opportunity to get Really Wet... and we had already done that. But the last thing we do at the park, not a Trailblazer ride, was pretty lame too: Flooded Mine, which was an electronic "shooting gallery" where you sat in a little boat moving through a "mine" being worked by convicts. Rather like the Buzz Lightyear "ride" at Disneyland.

You might have picked up from the descriptions that Silver Dollar City's long suit isn't rides. They aren't at all bad, really, and some are innovative, but there aren't that many of them, and they're mostly copies of rides found elsewhere. For Missourians looking for thrilling rides, there's a Six Flags outside St. Louis. No, the *real* attraction of SDC is the "original" character - there are lots of craft shops, from steam-driven lathes and bandsaws for furniture making, to blacksmith forges, to knitting and quilting, and of course junk food cooking. You are NOT going to find deep-fried pork rinds at your generic amusement park! Other kinds of cooking, also; lunch in most places was burgers and fries. We found a sandwich shop with some interesting fare (*not* heroes or grinders); with the drinks, chips, and some dessert pies (peanut butter and rhubarb pie, more things you will NOT find at Disneyland), I was astonished to pay \$70! Also, the music. Jerri saw her circus, and there were musical acts here and there. We just missed "Barbeque and Bluegrass" at SDC by a week.

An example of the craft work - a woodcarving of the Ten Commandments. The woodcarver had his bench in the shop. We wasn't working at the time, unlike the blacksmiths who always seemed to be banging on their red-hot iron.



Another woodcarving of the musical scoring for the familiar hymn. This illustrates another fascinating thing about SDC, and really Branson in general; the unabashed presentation of a traditional or cultural Christianity. You would NEVER see something like this at Disneyland or Knott's or Six Flags!

The iconic picture of the railroad underpass, with all the people going under and the train going over. Sadly, we did not have time for the train.



Turn around from the underpass, and see the benches, including the two footsore girls waiting for their mom to show up after the circus.





Naughty girls getting what they deserve.

In a gift shop, Charity finds a moose hat.



And Faith wears a turtle.

The day has come to a close, and the rides and shops are shutting down. There will be a country music concert at the amphitheatre here before the park actually closes, no charge for park guests, but we decide we've had enough. Other than the train ride, I regret not having

had time for two other things: First, Homestead Ridge, which had some example Ozark cabins, a "mystery house" where the water bends out of the faucet and balls roll uphill, and a relocated original wooden church building where visitors can sing along with hymns. Second, Marvel Cave, which is the reason for SDC being here and was the original attraction.

Sunday June 10: Gospel and Bluegrass

The next day is Sunday. Given the level of cultural Christianity in the area, I am not surprised that there are Gospel musical shows on Sunday morning. Unfortunately, my crew can't get moving early enough for us to get to any of the clearly "musical show" events. Instead, we end up in a little theatre with maybe twenty in the audience and an old preacher on the stage with his wife playing a little portable keyboard. After a few familiar hymns sung from memory (no bulletins or song sheets or projections - I get an idea about his audience expectations), the preacher delivers an Assemblies of God style message, with lots of asking for shows of hands and verbal responses. God has "told" him to build a "History of Revival Museum" in Branson. Having driven past the delapidated antique car museum and the toy museum on the Strip, I don't have high hopes for a revival museum, nor is the purpose for such a museum in furthering the Kingdom clear to me. It was an... interesting show. I would have preferred a Gospel music show, though, even if it included a similar message and altar call.

After the service, we return to the timeshare because I have agreed with the operators to hear their presentation in return for a \$100 gift. There's a lot of this in Branson, but I agree to *this* one because I've got a toe in the door already, with my step-mom owning a share, and besides that, I'm curious how it works. It sounds pretty neat, but in the end, it came down to a pressure sales technique of trying to get me to buy what amounts to a second house after an hour's worth of thought. I don't deal that way. Besides, the Wyndham portfolio of nation-wide timeshare resorts is not as flexible as just booking a hotel for a night or two, which is how we operate, and resorts are geared around a longer visit than the couple of days we tend to stay in one place. Branson is an exception to this style, and the timeshare apartment has been great... but it also cuts us out of staying at the hotel on the Strip with the indoor water park!

After shaking the salesman (and his boss whom he called over), we collect our \$100 and run back to the strip looking for a buffet place I've read about in the abundant Branson tourist literature. Eventually, we

find it - a great meal, eaten in the dining area right next to an indoor miniature golf course. Every so often the lights would dim on the course, some strobe lights would start flashing, and sprinklers would rain down on the plants between the greens. Sort of a "Rainforest Cafe" effect, but without the animatronic elephants and gorillas. The buffet reinforced my impression of Branson as being a family-friendly alternative to Las Vegas; the food was good, maybe better than Harrah's, and instead of girls dancing on platforms among the card tables, we get to see simulated squalls over a miniature golf course.

After Sunday dinner, we go back downtown so mommy and her daughters can finish the exploration of the flea market shops on the hill. I've seen enough of that, so I go *up* the hill to a Branson landmark: Dick's Five and Ten Store. This is just an amazing place, stuffed with a variety of



merchandise from sewing notions and kitchen implements to toys and tourist goodies. Part of Dick's reputation is the collection of paintings of military ships and aircraft, which are hung from the ceiling over the aisles, and some autographed on the back by the artists or the pilots whose airplanes are depicted. There's an amazing amount of people in here, mostly tourists, I suppose, gawking at the "downtown Branson landmark". Which includes me!



It was here where I saw the cultural Christianity thing break down a little - Jesus keeping company with some half-naked fairies. Got to stock merchandise for all comers, I suppose.

The time has come to take in Charity's choice - the Petersen Family Band (petersenfamilyband.com). When we went to the Coconino County Fair last year, we were charmed by the Kent Family Circus. We were even more charmed with a family where the oldest daughter (senior at the nearby College of the Ozarks) plays the fiddle, the next daughter (sophomore at CofO) plays a pink banjo, the son (high school junior) plays guitar, mom plays the mandolin, and dad plays the bass fiddle and occasionally the piano. The youngest daughter is 8 years old, and steps in twice to sing a cute song. The girls are always ribbing each other and the shy boy. The music is bluegrass, of course, very well done, and some gospel with bluegrass sauce, a couple of blues songs (including one where the boy and the two girls put on sunglasses), even a yodelling song! Charity and Faith are particularly charmed, and we end up getting some of their media - including their favorite anti-dating song, "Daddy's Got A Gun".

(Interesting how my California surgeon friend knew Carolina Cotton, the "yodelling blonde bombshell", and the banjo-playing girl sang the yodelling song. And she is blonde. Weird linkages...)

The final event of the day is to see the famous true to the book (unlike the John Wayne film) Shepherd of the Hills outdoor drama. Every night for many years now, the local home-grown dramatic talent puts on the show in a typical turn-of-the-century Ozark town near Branson, where a gang of baldknobbers have robbed the bank and taken the savings of the townspeople. What follows is a story of character and noble choices, community closeness, and romance. A wonderful experience - even if

we didn't buy the usual tourist photo package to memorialize the event.

Monday June 11: Leaving Branson

Our first taste of Branson is at an end, and we have packed up the car and returned the key to the office. We have had enough of pop-tart or cereal-and-milk breakfasts, and we have seen an IHOP at the west end of the Strip. While we sit outside waiting for our table, the wind is picking up, and we see dark clouds coming over the hills. Then we get called inside and get our breakfast. While we are eating, some young men from a singing act come in and circulate around the tables, singing a capella and distributing flyers for their show. Just as we are leaving, another man is going around the tables, and he gives us a brochure and invites us to his show. This is apparently common for Branson.

When we park the car at the restaurant, we notice two adjacent cars with Alaska and Hawaii plates. They come from all over!



In the time we have been inside eating breakfast, the dark clouds have arrived and the rain is pouring down. I pay the bill while Jerri and the children go to the car. I am expecting the car to be brought out front by the time I'm done, but it isn't there. I dash to the back where the car is parked to find Faith outside the car trying to figure out how to close the hood. Mommy accidentally pulled the hood release. I am standing by the passenger door, which is locked - stupid modern cars automatically lock all the doors when the engine is started - but Mommy is too focused on the hood problem to notice me standing there. By the time I shove the hood all the way down and latched and Jerri unlocks the silly door, I'm pretty wet.

Even on Monday morning, it's slow driving back to the freeway. The curbs are flowing, and the miniature golf courses sit abandoned and forlorn in the downpour. By the time we get to the freeway, the rain has

pretty much ceased, and the air conditioning is extracting the dampness from my clothes and hair. An interesting adventure to end our Branson visit. I'm just glad it didn't rain on us like that before now!