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2000 January 4

A New Mexico Diary

Skip to the last entry for especially important news.

1999 January 9: Today finds us at El Malpais National Monument, west of Albuquerque. The Monument encompasses an extensive area of lava flows, beneath which a network of lava tubes extends for miles. We intend to explore the Four Windows Tube, to make plans for Jeremy's birthday party, which will be held deep in the Tube three weeks hence. We set off across the flow on a crisp, but clear mid-winter day and quickly discover that this kind of hiking requires constant attention, partly because it's easy to get lost, but also because the surface consists of jagged rocks, some of which tilt and sway under foot.

Entry to the Four Windows Tube is through a massive roof collapse, beyond which are the four small skylights that give the Tube its name. We clamber down a jumble of rocks into the entryway, but before venturing into the maw of the Tube, pause to enjoy our lunch, each of us plopping down on an apparently barren rock that approximates a bench. As we munch, we notice with surprise the tiny cacti that grow directly out of many of the rocks. Rising to leave, Karen discovers that these cacti are not so amusing. She has broken the first rule of the desert: never sit on a cactus. Though the cactus is destroyed, this provides scant comfort as Karen drops her pants so Eleanor can extract the thorns.

1999 January 30: Six boys, seven adults, and Eleanor join in singing Happy Birthday to Jeremy in the pitch dark of the Four Windows Tube. Proceeding along the Tube, we marvel at the ice stalagmites, which sprout up to a foot tall from the floor of the Tube. They shimmer and sparkle in the light of our flashlights like a garden of jewels, though some claim they resemble a band of stubby aliens. Venturing farther into the Tube than in our exploratory foray three weeks ago, we find an exit through a narrow chimney, which slashes the hands of those who didn't heed the advice to wear gloves.

1999 April 6: Eleanor's softball team, the Cardinals, plays the Diamondbacks. The last two years the Cardinals learned how to be good sports in defeat, but this year the girls are older, and they've picked up some new players who are very good. After two years of being beaten by the Diamondbacks—creamed is the word—they beat them today, 10–5, to start what promises to be an outstanding season. Eleanor enjoys the win, but what she likes most is that three of her best friends are on the team this year.

1999 May 22: Jeremy won a contest sponsored by the *Albuquerque Journal* and CBS Southwest, the local CBS affiliate. To win, he submitted a special entry form on which he answered seven weather-related questions and recorded high temperatures for a week. Today he joins three other winners and Robin Marshment, weather person for CBS Southwest, as they fly to Phoenix for the day aboard the *Journal's* private jet, piloted by T. H. Lang, owner of the *Journal*, and Evgeny Frolov, former Russian test pilot. Jeremy enjoys the party's tour of the Phoenix Science Museum, but he is especially impressed with the aircraft, whose seat belt buckles and cabinet handles are gold-plated. The only hitch is that the organizers insist that Arizona is on Daylight Time, despite assurances to the contrary from several parents, including Karen; this delusion leaves the party cooling their heels—there's a trick, cooling anything in Phoenix—at the entrance to the Science Museum 20 minutes before its opening.

1999 May 28: In a special service, Karen is installed as President of Congregation Albert and immediately sets out to challenge the notion that the Temple should be governed from Albuquerque.

1999 June 21: Having climbed 325 steps to the top of Durham cathedral, we celebrate the solstice by taking in a 360° view of a huge swath of northern England. It's a brilliant day, puffy white clouds dotting a pure blue sky and only an occasional spatter of rain. We're right in the middle of a five-week trip to England, Carl having been invited to spend that period at the Isaac Newton Institute in Cambridge. We've gotten used to being prepared for rain at all times; washing our clothes in a machine that takes twice the time and has half the capacity of our home machine; relying on our feet, the trains, and the London Underground for almost all transportation (Karen, Jeremy, and Eleanor have already spent five days in London and one at Stonehenge); driving on the left on this weekend excursion (only Carl can drive, because Karen won't drive on the left and couldn't handle a left-handed stick shift anyway); eating pasties for lunch; ordering a Lamb McSpicey at McDonald's; and having our most mundane actions referred to as "brilliant," Britspeak for great or wonderful. All that was relatively easy, but we've even started to learn the rules of cricket and watched one day of a three-day match in Cambridge.

Today is the last day of a four-day mini-vacation in "The North." On Friday we toured York, finishing the day with an evening Ghost Walk through the streets of the old city, rendered less atmospheric by the Sun's refusal to set till nearly 10:00 pm. On Saturday we tramped across a heather-covered expanse of moor in North York Moors National Park, experiencing first-hand the desolation that figures in so much 19th century English literature. In Goathland, we descended from the moor into a deep ravine to see a small waterfall called the Mallyan Spout. As we began our descent, Eleanor swung her hand through the stinging nettles lining the trail and let out a yelp that reminded us of her blundering into a patch of nettles six years ago in Wisconsin. Jeremy, sure that Eleanor's pain was only wimpiness, promptly grabbed a handful of nettles and changed his mind. We begin to think of Eleanor as our "nettle detector." Returning to the top of the trail, we enjoyed afternoon tea at the Mallyan Spout Hotel, where Eleanor learns from Carl the pleasure of a good scone, even though she insists on picking out all the currants.

Yesterday we visited the remains of Hadrian's Wall, built by the Romans over a six-year period beginning in CE 122. Once fifteen feet high, the Wall spanned Britain from coast to coast, protecting Roman civilization from the depredations of the Picts and Scots. Just after a brief, but heavy shower, we walked along remains of the Wall as it traces the crest of the Whin Sill ridge from Steel Rigg to Housesteads. The ridge afforded superb views of the northern English countryside; the Sun, peeking through scattered clouds, spotlighted bright green meadows dotted with sheep.

Before our walk, Eleanor discovered the world's best hot chocolate at The Roman Army Museum. Afterward, as evening approached, we realized that the only nearby possibility for dinner was an isolated pub called the Twice Brewed Inn. As we approached the pub, Karen pointed out a large sign—"Open Every Day. Ex. Sunday"—and concluded that, it being Sunday, we were out of luck, to which Eleanor replied emphatically, "No, that sign means, 'Open Every Day. Example: Sunday'."

1999 July 4: Karen, Jeremy, and Eleanor break their string of sixteen straight days of travel away from Cambridge, typically to London for the day to see a sight like the Tower or Buckingham Palace or Hampton Court or to go to a play like *Mamma Mia!*, the hit musical with a libretto written to showcase Abba's songs from the 70's. Occasionally their trips took them further afield, as in a day trip to Bath to view the Roman ruins and when Carl joined them for weekend auto excursions. Jeremy planned all the train and tube travel; he can now construct in his head a route between any two stops on London's extensive Underground. Having spent so much time underground, none of them is likely ever to forget the injunction to "Mind the Gap." They have often found it convenient to buy dinner at the McDonald's across the street from King's Cross Station in London or at the Upper Crust within the station, consuming the food during the hour-long train ride to Cambridge. The desirability of the McDonald's option increased markedly when McDonald's began distributing a set of Snoopy figurines, not available in America, with Snoopy dressed in outfits from 30 countries. Dedicated consumption of Happy Meals led to the acquisition of fifteen different figurines.

Today we go “punting” on the Cam, something Eleanor has wanted to do since our arrival. Joining us are Chris and Kiki Fuchs and their six-month-old daughter, Emma. A primitive form of boating, punting survives in Cambridge as a form of time travel to the Victorian era. The passengers lounge in the shallow-bottomed craft, eating and drinking and generally enjoying themselves, while the punt is propelled by a person standing in the stern, who pushes against the bottom with a very long pole. Jeremy and Carl demonstrate their utter ineptitude at poling, as the punt careens from one side of the Cam to the other and rams every other punt that comes in sight. Far from enjoying themselves, Chris and Kiki are petrified that little Emma will end up in the murky water.

1999 July 10: We return to Albuquerque tomorrow. Karen, Jeremy, and Eleanor finished off their last week in England with a bang, with day trips to Windsor Castle, Brighton, and York. Yesterday afternoon we tried another round of punting. With our Australian friend, Gerard Milburn, demonstrating how to pole, Jeremy and Carl became sufficiently adept that the punt glided smoothly for long periods without running into anything. Today we spend the last day of our trip in London. Though Jeremy and Eleanor have acquired the aversion to cathedrals that afflicts most British children, Karen and Carl overrule their objections so we can see St. Paul’s Cathedral, which still dominates the London skyline over 300 years after being built under the direction of Christopher Wren. We set a new record for cathedral steps by climbing all 525 to the top of the dome, where we enjoy magnificent views of the great city as it approaches a new millennium. We hope to return.

1999 August 10: We end today in Ely, Nevada, wandering around the decaying railyard of a small town on America’s “Loneliest Highway.” Quite a change from the Ely just north of Cambridge, where just a few weeks ago, Jeremy, Karen, and Eleanor saw Oliver Cromwell’s home. We’re approaching the end of a long trip, whose avowed purpose was achieved two days ago, when we attended the marriage of Karen’s brother, Ken, to Mary Dalrymple. The wedding, conducted by a local cantor, was held on the lawn of the California Palace of Legion of Honor, with an unforgettable view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Marin headlands. Eleanor, resplendent in a purple dress, served as the flower girl. The often foggy San Francisco weather cooperated with a beautiful, picture-perfect, sunny evening, though the breeze provided an occasional reminder of the famous Twain quip, “The coldest winter I ever spent was August in San Francisco.”

1999 August 15: 3,740 miles and 24 days after leaving Albuquerque, Karen, Jeremy, and Eleanor return home today, their vacationing finally terminated by the imminent start of school two days hence. During this summer vacation, they spent 65 days vacationing and 19 days at home, a favorable ratio of more than 3 to 1. Carl joined them in California on August 3, thereby reducing his ratio to exactly 2:1—and, of course, he spent some time working in England, although he viewed it less as work than as a rest from the vigorous vacation pace set by the rest of the family. Most of this trip was spent in the Bay Area, where we enjoyed the hospitality of our good friends, Steve Honda and Nancy Hom. Highlights were spread across the entire West, however, and included the best of Las Vegas—a hard-hat tour of Hoover Dam, the Star Trek experience, and a collection of cups from every casino—while staying with long-time friend Penny Manly; touring the Hershey’s factory in Oakdale, California; riding BART at every opportunity; seeing the Giants play the Cardinals at Candlestick, with Mark McGwire tossed out of the game in his second at bat; watching the Orioles beat the A’s at Oakland Coliseum, conveniently located at a BART stop; a tour of the Jelly Belly factory in Fairfield; Ken and Mary’s wedding; the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento; panning for gold—we didn’t get rich—in the American River at Coloma, site of James Marshall’s discovery of gold on 1848 January 24; exploring Lehman Caves and hiking to the southernmost glacier in North America on the flanks of Wheeler Peak, both in Great Basin National Park in eastern Nevada; red rocks in Colorado National Monument just outside Grand Junction, Colorado; swimming in the sulphur pool at Glenwood Springs; and watching an entertaining 10-home-run slugfest at Coors Field, in which the Rockies beat the Expos 11–8, with four players contributing two home runs a piece. We spent the past day and a half in Denver, staying with former Albuquerqueans, Larry Beal and Dorothy Oster. Jeremy and Aaron took over an entire room in the Oster-Beal house for a furious round of mid-season baseball-card trading.

1999 November 2: A bear wiped out our bird feeders last night. Probably the same one that plagued the neighborhood in late August and September, it crushed the wire cage of the peanut feeder the way you might crush a peanut shell. Carl begins designing an all but gold-plated bear-proof bird-feeder hanger.

1999 December 25: We wake to a howling wind and swirling snow. The bird-feeder hanger, installed two weeks ago, survives the wind and is declared a success, though it has not yet faced trial by bear. By mid-afternoon the Sun is shining brightly through scattered clouds, demonstrating yet again that it's hard to keep a New Mexico day down. Carl cycles along Tramway Boulevard, at the foot of the Sandias, as the Sun disappears behind a bank of clouds along the western horizon. Gloom encloses the bike trail, but clouds lingering on the monoliths near the top of the Sandias remain brilliantly lit, hugging the great granitic shoulders like a stole of purest white. The Sun sinks lower; the stole turns pink on shoulders that smolder a dull red. Finally the light goes out, leaving only the icy blues and greys of wintry dusk.

1999 December 31: Family and friends join us for the millennial passage at the home of our good friends, Geoffrey and Julia Kalmus. After vicarious celebrations of the millennium in the time zones of various guests, we in western America finally get our chance at midnight Mountain Standard Time. Albuquerque explodes in fireworks, and then we proceed quickly to bed so as to be rested and ready for an even bigger celebration.

2000 January 1: Jeremy becomes a Bar Mitzvah today. He leads the service with confidence, reads from the Torah with zest, and gives a rousing speech that has Rabbi Black thinking that he might be able to take a few days off. Eleanor makes a surprise contribution by joining Cantor Shuchat-Marx in singing the sermon anthem. The celebration continues in the evening, with a party featuring New Mexican food and a program of Jeremy's favorite songs from the great American musicals. Thanks to *all* our family and friends who joined us and helped make this a day to remember.

A Bar Mitzvah without family and friends would be like a sopaipilla without honey.*

Best Wishes,

Eleanor

Jeremy

Karen

Carl

CMC/TEX

P.S. The photo shows Karen, Eleanor, and Jeremy outside the Jelly Belly factory, celebrating the acquisition of several sacks of Belly Flops.

* A sopaipilla is a common dessert item at New Mexican restaurants. The Webster's New World College Dictionary that Jeremy received as a Bar Mitzvah present defines a sopaipilla as "a piece of puffed, deep-fried bread, usually dipped in or covered with honey." Not a bad definition, but to appreciate the metaphor fully, you really have to eat one. If you haven't, perhaps you ought to come see us.