

(Title) Traveling with Ella in a Open Cooler

The 2009 Annual Conference was a big success by all measures that I am aware of. Thanks to all who worked hard to make it such an enjoyable and for me educational event. Special thanks to Beth and Dale who did such a grand job as hosts.

I have had the opportunity to serve on your Education and Promotions Committee this past year. As you might expect it has been good to get to know fellow members better especially Dave Beckstrand and Ron Shepard who among others provide leadership for that group. As a member of the Pro/Ed Committee I have had the opportunity to do “booth duty” at a couple of conferences including a Value Added Conference in Rochester. That gave us the occasion to get to know Connie and Jim Stannard and to visit their Big Shaggy Buffalo Farm, which is near Rochester.

You may or you may not have noticed a small photo of Connie, Jim, my granddaughter Ella and I in the last Bison News. That same photo, submitted by Connie, was also shown at the Annual Conference. Ella spends a lot of time with us. Ella, much like your grandkids is cute, loveable and above average in every way.

Stay with me now, I’m going somewhere with this. It’s just a lengthy tie in.

When the opportunity to attend the Value Added meeting in January came up I asked Gail W. if she would go with me as sort of winter break.

The Radisson Hotel down there has an indoor pool and hot tub. That’s not exactly Cozumel but it is as close as Gail W. got to a beach this winter. The plan was to make a leisurely drive to Rochester on Wednesday, set-up the small booth Wednesday evening, work the booth Thursday and Friday, and then pack up to drive home Friday night.

Gail agreed to go but soon realized that since Ella usually leaves here for the weekend on Friday and does not get back until late Sunday, she would not see her for most of five days.

That wasn’t going to work.

We took Ella along to Rochester.

Ella was fifteen months old and just starting to walk.

On Wednesday, we made a prearranged stop in Maple Grove to deliver a half of hog to a customer. Packaged and frozen, of course, and in two medium sized coolers. The cooler becomes important later in the story so I’ll take the time to describe it now. Pay attention because you need to be able to visualize this cooler.

This is a cheap (\$21 at Wal-Mart) all plastic cooler with wheels and an extendable handle. The wheel and handle set-up is much like you see on many suitcases. The cooler is not big. It is square not oblong. Overall a medium small “60 can size” cooler that transports well on wheels. The plastic lid is completely removable.

I remind you that Ella is always incredibly good company and fun to be with. She seems to believe that the entire universe was created especially for her.

Gail brought everything that is required to take care of a baby for a few days. The one thing we didn’t give enough thought to was that we are both a little old to be carrying a kid long distances.

The distances weren’t great really. The Radisson Hotel, the Mayo Civic Center (the conference site) and much of downtown Rochester are all on a nice skyway system so getting around was warm and relatively easy.

Still, neither my knees nor Gail’s lower back are what they once were.

Thursday morning, Gail and Ella traveled the skyway to visit me at the booth in Civic Center. This is the part that you must be able to visualize. Picture Gail pushing the cooler with Ella standing inside. There was room for a couple of choice toys a small blanket and a few other necessities. When standing, Ella’s waist is about even with the top of the cooler. Ella rode along in that cooler as if she were a princess, waiving to and greeting her subjects while standing on a fine chariot.

She never let up on that either. I hauled her around some myself. No matter where she went in the skyways, she did not shirk her responsibility to speak to or wave to every person she met. If someone failed to acknowledge her, there were few such, she would turn her head and watch them walk away. She was clearly wondering what could be wrong with that poor unhappy, possibly blind person.

On Friday, Gail decided that she and Ella would go someplace special for lunch. They followed the skyway to a restaurant that was a little on the upscale side. I infer that because Gail said they did not have prices on the menu.

I was not there, but Gail told me later that the hostess was reluctant to seat them and in fact ignored them for a time. There were plenty of open tables. Gail theorized that maybe it was the fact that she was dressed in blue jeans and had a baby with her. I suggested to Gail that it might have something to do with the fact that the kid was riding in what most people would recognize as a beat-up beer cooler.

When Gail did get the hostess' attention, she seated them in a far corner away from any other customers. The spot happened to be near a staff workspace and although there was a wall between the workspace and the table, the wall did not reach the floor. Ella was able to look under the wall and communicate with those of her subjects laboring on the far side. That included the reluctant hostess.

Realizing that the woman was cool to her, or maybe not, Ella proceeded to work on her until they became good friends.

Before lunch was over the hostess brought a huge dish of ice cream for Ella.

This I believe is going to be the story of Ella's life.

She can show up wearing old blue jeans, riding in a plastic beer cooler, make friends and get a free lunch.

Attitude matters, a lot.

Have a great Spring.

Tom Barthel, Director at Large