

"Happy Holidays" to Friends and Family Everywhere,

Surprise! For the first time in many years, this greeting was authored before the New Year — necessitated by travel east for the holidays to see our daughters in Providence and Ruth's mother and sister in New York

Our year in brief: *full of changes and transitions, more in quantity than earth-shakingness:*

- the passing of a parent (and a pet),
- ascendancy to Presidency of our learning-in-retirement organization,
- a pair of 45th high school reunions,
- blitz-building a house in New Orleans, but scaling back on local Habitat days,
- slowing down on (some) sports activities,
- mucho travel: two long foreign tours, including Asia for the first time (*only our 3rd continent*),
- two daughters simultaneously testing job markets, one while undergoing a house remodel,
- California residency now for more than half of both our lives (all in the same house!), and
- finally, deep enough into busy retirement (*over 3 and a half years*) to now go long periods (*weeks, months...*) without thinking about that past era of our lives when we were honest wage earners.

Plus, the 40th anniversary of our first date (*Fall of 1968 in Computer Sciences grad school at Purdue*). Oh yes, that actual earth-shaking transition occurring in DC agrees with us too. *Some details follow...*

Sadly, Hal's mother, Vivian, died this year after a mercifully short illness. She was 91 and remained cheerful and upbeat until the very end, even after she made the decision to refuse further treatment and die in her own home under hospice care. Her explanation, "What's the point of being miserable and making everyone else miserable too?" are words that we can all strive to live by. We flew the girls home from Providence to see her and she spent her last days telling her children and grandchildren stories of her youth, some of which we had never heard. She made this so easy for all of us. Hal's sister Meredith brought her Siamese kittens for a visit and they were very well behaved. In July, family and several of Vivian's friends gathered in Rocky Mountain National Park to scatter her ashes in one of the places she loved best — joining her husband Hal, Sr., whose ashes we scattered there in 2003.

We lost one of our cats this year as well. Baby, a half-Himalayan, half-long-haired Siamese, inherited her mother's gene for polycystic kidney disease, a fatal disease which also killed her mother, Natasha, and at least three of her siblings. We had hoped that she had escaped, as most deaths occur between ages 3 and 10, and she was 9 2/3 when she died. We are now down to 2 cats, Bullwinkle, a rescued cat who we believe is around 15, and Baby's father, Boris, who is 11 (plus 2 regular visitors, who give Boris fits). However, we may adopt a kitten (or 2) from Erika's friend Jessica, whose family now has 12.

We're both increasingly involved in our peer-taught *Learning-in-Retirement* organization (Omnilore.org). In addition to the common readings and preparing our own required presentations for the classes we take, Ruth has somehow found herself the new Omnilore President, and Hal is Equipment Manager (*installed wireless...*). Hal continues in the Shakespeare group and Ruth just finished classes on Linguistics and Documentary movies (each member chose a movie, we watched them independently at home, and then discussed them in class — it was fantastic). Last summer we both took a *brings-back-the-memories* "1968" class that covered almost 20 world-changing events from that turbulent year, not just the 3 or 4 we all remember (*Vietnam, assassinations, Chicago Democratic Convention, Black Power salute at the Mexico City Olympics*)—but, are the times we grew up in really presented as "history" now? Say it's not so.

About those 45th HS reunions (*NYC and Valparaiso, Indiana, respectively*): We enjoy reconnecting with our old *not-so-old* classmates, but it is depressing to think that the next reunions will be our 50th! More comforting reconnections came on another long weekend in the New York area in January for a family wedding.

In May, Hal participated in one more Habitat Carter Work Project, in a group who blitz built a "simple, decent" New Orleans house (*elevated 4 feet*) to 95% completion in 5 long, hard days. Their house leader was a young woman (Jenny, now on N.O. Habitat staff) he worked with in Los Angeles during her two AmeriCorps years here. Their LA contingent of 7 stayed in a lovely bed-and-breakfast (*The Green House Inn*) in the Garden District, two blocks from St. Charles Avenue. Hal enjoyed it so much that we have decided to go to Mardi Gras in 2009 (one of those things on our bucket list) and will stay there. Hal also made several trips to Providence for what we call "Habitat for Daughters" — applying skills he has learned over 8 years of Habitat volunteering — helping to remodel Erika's almost-100 year old house, replacing the cheap paneling that covered the walls with drywall, installing real doors

in the bedrooms, reconstructing closets, etc. Amazingly, Erika is picking up all Hal's construction skills and now performs some of them better than he does (*e.g., electrical wiring, drywall mudding & taping*). Habitat-for-Daughters leaves less time for LA Habitat, but the body is making noises about slowing down anyway (*softball is trending to zero faster*). But his golf game may finally be on the rise, what with induction into the local Los Verdes Men's Club (*LV has panoramic views of the Pacific!*). Some things don't change: occasional 4-mile walks in the neighborhood (*both of us*), Tuesday yoga group (*Ruth*), monthly TRW Book Club (*Ruth, at which time Hal hosts poker*), gym workouts (*Hal*)...

In addition to the travel already mentioned, we took four other trips this year. In March, shortly after Hal's mother's death, we did a Grand Circle Travel guided tour to Costa Rica and Guatemala for 19 days. It was a wonderful trip (riding *zip lines* through treetops and over valleys was among many highlights), seeing two very different and fascinating countries, marred only by the theft of Hal's fanny pack from the back of a seat in a beachside restaurant two days before we returned home — with his passport in the hotel safe, the only serious loss was some cash and our camera (*covered by insurance*), and fellow travelers helped replace our snapshots (digital, of course) so this episode did not diminish our enjoyment. We then took our RV to New Mexico in late April/early May. We visited White Sands National Monument, Carlsbad Caverns, several Indian sites, Albuquerque (where we visited one of Ruth's elementary/HS classmates) and Santa Fe, narrowly avoiding the fires that were raging through the state at the time. On the way home, we stopped in Petrified Forest National Park for a few hours. We continue to enjoy exploring the Southwest and never quite see everything we have planned. We were starting to think the price of gasoline would curtail future RV'g, but who knows now? Next up was a week in Hawaii. Although we have been to Hawaii several times, we have always avoided Honolulu in favor of the less congested outer islands. This time, we stayed in Waikiki and visited some of the tourist sites, such as the Bishop Museum and Diamond Head, as well as the Polynesian Cultural Center on the North Shore.

Finally, we spent three weeks in October in Thailand and (North) Vietnam, which were amazing. Fortunately, we were able to avoid the unrest in Bangkok which began just as we arrived and had not yet heated up. We're now sold on using a tour group when we don't know the language, but this time we toured with GCT's more rigorous offshoot, Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT), in a small group of 14 people (10 in Vietnam). OAT "requires" all to be physically fit, so we got to do lots of things that were somewhat out of the ordinary. In addition to Bangkok, we visited the River Kwai area (where we got to walk across the rebuilt bridge), Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in the north, and even got to walk across the border into Myanmar, visit an island in Laos, ride elephants, and pet tigers. Hal even played a round of golf. In Vietnam, we learned to cross the street while dozens of motorbikes swerved around us, cruised on resorty Halong Bay on an absolutely perfect day, watching the myriad limestone islands pass by, and explored a couple of caves. It was neat to see Vietnam's recent evolution, we having come of age during what they call "The American War" in the 60's and 70's. We have had wonderful travelling companions with GCT & OAT, and we would highly recommend these outfits to those wishing affordable, well-researched guided tours like us!

Other than our Mardi Gras trip, we don't have any travel planned for next year yet. We still have a long list of foreign travel to do, including (but not limited to) China, Egypt, an African Safari, Macchu Pichu & the Galapagos, Australia and New Zealand, etc. etc. We're now having trouble prioritizing! It's also time for another cruise. Too many choices, too little time (and money). Stay tuned.

Erika (just turned 30!) and Alison (age 27) are still both living in Providence, Rhode Island, and are both looking for work, in software development and public policy (housing, health, education, etc.), respectively. Not a great time to be looking for work, to be sure, but we're hopeful (not blindly optimistic) that the new administration has the brains and ideas to turn the economy around, in both the long and short runs. It's a daunting task and we will all have to do our part. The *party* of the last 30 years is over, we're afraid.

Ruth's mother, Helen, is 88 and still doing well, although frustrated by the fact that she is no longer as agile as she used to be. None of us are, sorry to say! She and her 95-year-old husband Dave are still living independently in the apartment Ruth grew up in, although it gets more difficult for them each year. Fortunately, living in Manhattan means that there are lots of options for transportation.

Saturday, **February 14, 2009**, is **St. Harts Day XLI** our one social hosting of the year. Everyone's invited! Your **St. ♥'s Day invitation** is, as always, linked from <http://hart-site.net/>, our family website. And please send us (*by email, of course*) your email addresses and/or url's for any of you with your own websites.

Hal, Ruth, Erika, & Alison Hart