

Family, Friends, and Postal Inspectors:

HOT NEWS FLASH!!! Dateline North Pole. Santa's elves are unionizing; they're all joining the A-F-of-Elves ...

Yes, once again it's time for that merry roundup of tidbits, non sequiturs, tomfoolery, and blatant lies that we call The Christmas Newsletter. (You there in the back — I *heard* what you called it; that isn't nice!)

We'll begin with some news that's so old it's practically stale. (News freshener is available on request.) For the last ten years, first at Purdue and now at Intel, we've participated in the annual Football Pool, a high-stakes affair in which the grand prize is free pizza at the end of the year for the winners. Last year's competition ended shortly after the newsletter went to press, so we didn't get to report that Steve won the Weekend competition! As it says on the certificate presented to the winners, this "gives him the right to be generally insufferable whenever Pro Football is the subject", a right he has exercised repeatedly throughout the year. Thankfully, he has faded back into the pack this year, although Janet is still in the top 10.

Janet continues to take courses towards an Accounting degree. Her good grades and esoteric term paper topics have made her an expert on the Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat. She actually spent the summer working part-time as a bookkeeper for a collection of small businesses, one of which was named (I'm not making this up) Hawaii Beaver. The job was somewhat less than ideal; space limitations and professional ethics prevent us from telling you all the gory details, but we can say that these guys make The Three Stooges look like financial geniuses.

Last spring we drove to California for a week, staying with Paul and Raf Chew (old Purdue friends) who were at Berkeley on sabbatical. The house they were subletting was high in the hills, overlooking the Bay, the bridges, and San Francisco — magnificent. In San Francisco we stomped around on the last operational Liberty Ship. Some of the gun turrets could still be swiveled to fend off marauders; you'll be pleased to hear that Paul and Steve wiped out several menacing individuals on the nearby seawall, thus preserving democracy (or what passes for it) in San Francisco. We also visited the Exploratorium, which should be high on your list of things to do if you're ever in Baghdad-by-the-Bay. It's dirt cheap and chock-full of buttons to push, knobs to twiddle, and fascinating facts. This is where you go to learn the answers to all those scientific mystery questions you asked as a kid, like "If sound can't travel in a vacuum, why are vacuum cleaners so noisy?"

This summer, we turned 9380 NW Murlea Lane into the Tolopka Bird Sanctuary and Boarding House for Displaced Summer Students. Dee Doyle (another old Purdue-ite currently at New Mexico State) got a summer internship working in Steve's group at Intel and moved in with us lock, stock, and cockatiel. We discovered that cockatiels are much like cats and small children: they're quite intelligent, but on a selective basis. As a result, Janet and Shadra spent the summer glaring at each other from neutral corners. Halfway through the summer, kind-hearted Dee decided to alleviate Shadra's loneliness by procuring a conure (etymological note: "conure" is derived from the Greek meaning "small skittish green bird"). This turned out to be an excellent idea, as it allowed the birds to spend some of their time glaring at each other, thus taking the pressure off Janet. Seriously, though, we really enjoyed having Dee for the extended visit, and the birds were terrific fricasseed with a little wild rice.

Landscaping has proceeded apace. We now have our full complement of bushes and trees, and most of them actually seem pretty happy (it's clear they haven't yet figured out that Typhoid Steve and Janet own them). We decided early in the summer that we needed another layer of bark dust in the beds to discourage the weeds. We also decided to spread it ourselves (heck, even *we* can move dirt around without consultants!). So Janet ordered one unit of bark dust. "One!" cried Steve, "Don't be ridiculous! Surely we need at *least* two units!" But noooooooo, Janet ordered only one.

It came in June.
We moved the last of it in October.



It's amazing how innocuous something like "one unit" can sound until you move it; that's 7.4 cubic yards, or 200 cubic feet, or 60 wheelbarrow loads, or one billion skillion shovelfuls. At any rate, it's all in place now and looks very nice. The weeds, of course, could not be happier.

Portland is somewhat unusual in that it has its own local game show: "And now, it's Channel Eight's Oooooooooon The Spot, with your host Larry Blackmar!" On The Spot will never rival Jeopardy in difficulty, but it's kinda fun and occasionally you see someone you know. Host Larry Blackmar provides additional (unintentional) entertainment value with exchanges like this:

Larry: "Where is Mont Blanc?" (*Probably pronounced to rhyme with Font Tank.*)

Contestant: "On the border between France and Italy."

(Larry's face glazes over; a smile remains fixed on his lips and he never turns his head, but his eyes shift quickly to the judges. The contestant starts getting edgy. But the judges come through.)

Larry (relieved): "Yes, it's in Europe!"

And off they go to the next question.

Well, after one evening too many of saying "We could win money at this game", we headed down to the KGW studios for the contestant tryouts. After passing the written trivia quiz (which weeded out half the applicants), we got to audition for the show's producer. This consisted of standing up when he called your name and talking about yourself for five seconds (I'm not making this up). Janet told 'em she was a tap dancer; Steve was a juggler. Finally, we played a short sample game with some of our fellow applicants, emceed by a member of the show's staff (in Steve's case, Larry himself). This was to see if you had enough initiative to ring in and answer the questions, and also tested for hand-mouth coordination ("ring the bell *before* answering the question"). And that was it. Like all self-respecting organizations, they refuse to tell you anything except "you'll be in our files through next May" — so maybe we'll still see you On The Spot.

Do you remember a British television show from the late 1960's called The Prisoner? It starred Patrick McGoochan as a (nameless) secret agent who resigned, was subsequently kidnapped, and spent 17 episodes in a bizarre place called The Village. McGoochan played Number Six. Every week, a new Number Two used drugs, trickery, hypnosis, coercion, or wallabies to find out why Number Six resigned; he, in turn sought answers to the questions "Whose side are you on?" (*That would be telling*), and "Who is Number One?". The "enforcer" in The Village was an eight-foot weather balloon named Rover that smothered people. Really weird stuff. At any rate, we found a friend who loaned us his videotape collection to copy (stop that sharp intake of breath; he got it off of PBS), and we've been showing biweekly installments of The Prisoner Film Festival to a small but enthusiastic audience since August. See what you've been missing?

Well, we could keep this up all day (many of you may think we already have), but we're sure you have trees to trim, lights to light, presents to wrap, cards to address, and geese to pluck (how many were going to St. Ives?), so we'll let you go. Stay healthy and happy, and keep in touch.

With much love,

Steve and Janet Tolopka