Greetings &

Holiday Salutations

December 2002

It hardly seems like another year has passed, and yet it has. I know this for several reasons, the foremost of which is the calendar on the wall! Therefore, it must be time for yet another massively entertaining, absolutely titillating, totally enthralling Holidazed Newsletter a la Mark! Oh, let's face it, it's a report on our travels and when we weren't traveling what we were doing on the house. Maestro, from the top if you please….

January 2002 found us doing a long weekend junket to Lost Wages, Nevada, over Martin Luther King weekend to meet up with some of Dick's friends from college. We enjoyed the sights and sounds of LV for 3 or 4 days. Although it was warmer there than in Iowa, I was surprised it wasn't nicer. I mean after all it is supposed to be the desert, isn't it? I hadn't been to Vegas since 1989 and it had been even longer since Dick had been there. My how things have changed – the casinos are bigger, flashier and more EXPENSIVE… everything is more expensive! Used to be you could go to Vegas for an *inexpensive* (nee "cheap") vacation. Not so much anymore. We did take in a show while there, some one hit wonder whose claim to fame was as a teenager he recorder that song "My Name is Michael, I've got a secret *BLAH-Blah-blah* something about a rollerskate key" Do you remember that one!? Then you're OLD, try not to fall asleep before you finish this letter! We also went out to Hoover Dam and took the Dam Tour. They had just re-opened maybe a month before we went out due to security concerns. But alas, you no longer get to tour the real "guts" of the dam, dammit. They do take you down to the observation area above the dynamo room, but that's about it. Oh, the guides also get quite a kick out saying things like, "We hope you're enjoying the *dam* tour." And "please exit the *dam* elevator" and "feel free to visit the *dam* visitor's center and *dam* gift shop." Ok-ok, we get the pun already, now stop it!

We returned home to the not so terrible winter of 2002 looking forward to spring… hello? I said SPRING! It took a while for spring to get here, but when it did, we of course started the never-ending tasks of lawn care. Oh for the days of the 10 foot wide backyard! Oh, and in between winter and spring Xerox Connect decided to close the local office and lay everybody off. Well, then, I guess there'll be time for that yard work now, won't there! (I have since been writing a database application for Dick's firm and doing the occasional odd job on the side while searching for "real" employment, i.e. a regular paycheck and benefits.)

The end of May found us leaving on our "Christmas present 2001" vacation (in other words it was planned at Christmas 2001, before I was laid off. We ventured off to London, the one in England, to join the Queen and her royal subjects in celebrating her Golden Jubilee – 50 years on the throne. Not since Queen Victoria has a monarch held the throne this long, and not likely to happen again in our lifetime. We were there a week and a couple days. The first four days had jubilee events going on most everyday and coincidentally, and most atypical of England, the weather was cooperating (mostly!) We of course did as much of the touristy stuff as we could – London Bridge, the Tower of London, Big Ben and houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral (designed by…? Anyone, anyone? Christopher Wren.) We rode the London Eye, that's the big modern "ferris wheel" like attraction built on the banks of the Thames for the Millenium celebration… what a view! We only traveled out of London proper on 4 occasions: 1) to Windsor Castle (Had tea the queen. Did too! Prove we didn't!), 2) to Chartwell House, Winston Churchill's estate (had tea with Churchill. Did too! Were you there? No!), 3) to Hampton Court, home of King Henry VIII and other monarchs after him, but before they moved to Buckingham palace (had tea with Henry. Did too! Ok… that's a fib!), and lastly D.) to The Royal Observatory at Greenwich, where the prime meridian divides the Eastern Hemisphere from the Western Hemisphere and also the home of H4, the first successful spring wound clock, accurate enough to use at sea and therefore making it possible to determine longitude (trust me, this

was BIG-big stuff! By the way, we didn't have tea there!) Along with assorted museums and lesser historic sites, all and all a veddy good time.

Summer brought more tending of grounds, planting of flower beds and new trees and upkeep in general. The ***big*** summer project was… house painting (but in truth, that didn't really get underway until late September, see Fall.) Let's see, what else is summer good for, oh, how about traveling!

For the long Fourth of July weekend we jetted out to the East coast to look at…? What else, more old houses! We went out to Newport, RI, former summer playground of the filthy rich of the late19th and early 20th centuries. The Vanderbilts ran the town, but only for 6-8 weeks of the year, after all Newport was just the locale of their summer "cottages"… OH-MY-GAWD! A lot of marble died to build those houses. We then drove up to Boston and met friends who came down from Portland, ME. This was on the Fourth, so we attended the free public Boston Pops concert on the banks of the Charles River and watched the annual fireworks display with around a half a million of our closest friends. The next day we were on the road again driving across Massachusetts on our way to the Hudson River Valley north of NYC to, what else, see more big old houses! Even stopped and saw Mark Twain's house in Hartford, CT on the way. "Now wait a minute," you're all saying. "He said they drove across Massachusetts, where did Connecticut come from?!" Well, if you're like I *was* and have never been out east, you quickly come to find that driving out east ain't the same as driving around the Midwest and far West… things are closer, *much closer.* Traffic may at times be bad, but physical distances are *not* great. Anywhoo, driving down the Hudson River valley is amazing, the scenery is abso-tively astounding, if only the Mississippi River valley looked like that! Along the way we toured (you guessed it…) more old homes, including FDR's (including the Presidential Library), another Vanderbilt "cottage" and the former home of John D. Rockefeller (also home to one time Governor of NY and U.S. Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller.) Then it was home again, whew!

As summer came to close and with little if any work being done on the house painting project, we needed a break (illogical – does not compute.) So this time we took a trip out west, going from the Rockies all the way to the Pacific Ocean! Over Labor Day weekend we flew out to Colorado and met up with some more friends in Colorado Springs and then drove to Keystone where another couple has a beautiful condo. Didn't see any old houses in Colorado, but we did take the cog railway up to the top of Pike's Peak! After the Labor Day weekend we left Keystone/Denver, still heading west, but this time not by plane or automobile, but by train, the California Zephyr to be exact. Dick had done part of this trip in the past, riding from Denver to Salt Lake City, but had never done the balance of the leg all the way to Cal-E-fornia. There are parts of the Rockies and Sierra Nevada mountains that can only be seen by train because, well… duh, there are no roads where the train went! The vistas were spectacular! It takes the better part of two days; leaving Denver, CO, the morning of the first day and arriving in Oakland, CA, the evening of the second day, but I must say, travel by train is fun. If you get the chance (and have the time before Amtrak goes bust!) this would be a trip you should consider. After spending the night in SanFran we rented a car (thereby making this vacation a true Trains, Planes & Automobiles trip (sans Steve Martin and John Candy) and drove down California's Highway One along the coast. Now, I had heard of how incredible this drive was, but had been warned, "the traffic is murder and it will be slow going." NOT! I guess everyone takes that adage of Labor Day being the end of summer to heart, because on the Thursday after Labor Day, we were all but alone on that road. The terminus of our trip was San Simeon, CA. For those who don't know, there is one thing to see at San Simeon and one thing only – a big old house! But not just any house, the Hearst "Castle", built by publishing tycoon, Wm Randolph Hearst over a period of nearly 40 years, and yet it was never completed. Parts of the house look like the workers just took down their scaffolding and left (maybe they had to paint a house in Davenport, IA!) But the bulk of the house and surrounding lands did indeed get completed. Did they ever! Artwork everywhere, ancient architectural elements worked into new structures and centuries old furniture. You would have a thought a man with that kind of money could have afforded to buy new instead of second-hand. HA! We did several tours, like Biltmore House in North Carolina, if you want to see it all, ya gotta pay! We went on 4 separate tours (all of which begin at the outdoor "Neptune" pool and end at the indoor "Roman" pool – why? They think that people would be disappointed if they only took one tour and didn't see these features.) Then it was back up the coast to San Francisco and surrounds where we were treated to a visit and lunch with my Aunt Mary and Uncle Bob. Then it was home again, whew (again)!

Fall was upon us and we could finally have some "at home" relaxation from summer gardening and lawn care. Oh, no! Remember that painting project that started in the summer (sorta), but we said we would get back to? Well, we're back to it! For those that don't know, which admittedly is most of you, the new house (where we have been 2 years now, come Jan `03) is not brick like the old house, but has siding, some of which is that old-fashioned kind you have to paint. The front of the house, which faces the river and the street, had had the aluminum siding removed years ago (the balance of the house is still entombed in the stuff!) But the former residents had not done a good job of maintaining the paint. At this point there wasn't much paint to maintain, most of it had cracked and peeled off. So as Dick repaired damaged siding by replacing sections of clapboard, I busied myself with scraping, priming and painting (two coats!) The second storey of the house is actually covered with cedar shakes, but one was hard pressed to tell as a century of paint had been glopped on them to the point where they appeared to be very wide clapboards with a somewhat strange "faceted" look – there was no gap from one shake to the next! I proceeded to scrape them down to bare wood (by hand? Heaven's no! We had borrowed a power paint scraper), then primed and painted, introducing a new paint scheme. Formerly, the house was white, a truly inappropriate color for a gal her age. Sidebar - white actually did not become a common color for houses until around the 1920's. For a Victorian, she needed some color! Now she sports a body color of a dark green second storey over light green first storey with the colors reversed for the trim. In the process I also found it beneficial to make, yes, I said make, a couple storms to cover old fancy, divided light windows which, thankfully, the previous owners did not replace when they did most of the rest of the windows in the house. Energy efficiency is important, but we cannot discount aesthetics altogether. Of course, the glazing was all but non-existent in these windows, so after spending 6 hours each re-glazing each of the sashes (remember, I said they were divided lights, 21 little panes (or in my cases, "pains") per sash. Once the siding repairs were done, it was time to paint the remainder of the siding and take down the scaffolding to expose the beauty of the new paint to all wandering eyes (NOTE: when passing the house by automobile, the *driver* should not wander their eyes too much as this may cause an accident).

Of course, now the rest of the house looks shabby! Project 2003 – more painting, but this time, along with all the above work, we also have to remove aluminum siding. We are hopeful there won't be TOO many surprises waiting under there! And that brings us to November and the holiday season that is upon us now. For Thanksgiving, Dick and I hosted my side of the family for Thanksgiving, well, actually the Sunday before Turkey Day to be precise. We had a most traditional Thanksgiving feast with `bird, stuffin', mashed taters & gravy, cranberry relish and punkin' pie served with homemade vanilla ice cream, every speck of which had the calories and fat removed – NOT! A good time was had by all. On Thanksgiving itself we joined Dick's family in Manchester, IA at his aunt and uncle's (also, coincidentally a big old Victorian house, but alas, no painting projects, no tours, nor teas!) The Christmas cookies have been baked, the Christmas letter is nearly complete and the decorations and lights are up. As the days wind down on 2002, our holiday wishes go out to family and friends scattered across the country, now and throughout the year ahead. And an extra special nod to my brother Bob, his wife Jean, and the girls, Crystal and Melissa; for their year has been challenging beyond measure and yet they persevere. Our hearts and prayers go out to them.

…But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ALL, AND TO ALL A GOOD-NIGHT!"