Could a year have gone by already? That's rhetorical, of course it has! Otherwise you wouldn't be reading yet another entertaining and overly informative… Sorenson-Davidson Christmas Letter 2003!

I tell myself every year this would be easier (and probably get out sooner) if I would just start writing it right away every year and just add items as they occur, but what's the fun in that?! Let's see, 2003, hmmmm… well January found us going to LostWages, Nevada to meet Dick's friends from college. We spent three glorious days basking in the glow of neon and occasionally dropping a coin in the one-armed bandits (I cleaned them out to the tune of about a $30 net gain!) Aside from scheduling our sightseeing around meals, we also squeezed in an evening seeing "Mama Mia" the Abba Musical, a big thumbs up! At some point after our return we decided it was time to finish the remodeling of the main bath. To that end we hired our favorite handy handyman, Curt. Curt finished what Dick & I had begun, we now have one fully redone, period looking bathroom! Yay! After all that work (well, okay, watching Curt work,) we needed to get away.

We were off to the Caribbean for a cruise, meeting up once again with our Vacation Pals, Richard & Doug from Topeka, KS. Starting in Puerto Rico we sailed off to multiple tropical ports of call. Our favorites were the less developed islands of St Kitts and Dominca. We took a tour by train around St Kitts and visited a banana plantation and spent time on a private beach on Dominca. The weather was fantastic every day of the cruise, raining only the last night at sea coming back into Puerto Rico at the end of the cruise.

Back in Iowa spring had sprung, and that meant time for lawn care and gardening, remember we're dealing with about 1.6 acres, but wait there's more! This year we took on mowing the neighbor's yard as well, as the man of the house had been called up on Marine Reserve duty and the lady of the house had her hands full tending to their two small children, that gave us almost 3 acres of mowing since their yard is nearly as big as ours! Speaking of children, we made our annual trip to Memphis, TN in April to visit Dick's sister and her family. The main event being his nephew Kyle's sixth birthday! This trip, along with putting in the annuals and planting a new shade garden (which will simplify future lawn care!) kept us busy throughout the summer. We did have one short weekend diversion mid-summer, taking a weekend and going to the Amana Colonies to join in on the Peterson-Davidson Family Reunion Weekend. Dick gets to see his Dad's side of family every other year when they gather for a weekend. The Davidson-Peterson's have scattered to all corners of the country, so often the reunion takes place elsewhere. This year his Mom & Dad were the organizers and therefore we got to stay close to home. As summer drew to a close we also gathered with my family for our annual Sorenson Family Picnic. Our gathering is even closer to home, with most of the folks close to by (the furthest driving around 3 hours to get here) we gathered at Scott County Park. Good food, good company, but alas, summer's light was dimming. Whoa! Summer is nearly over, that must mean another trip!

In late September Dick & I took off on our self-designated "Northern European Capitals Tour." After changing planes in London (a capital, but it doesn't count), we were off for Copenhagen, Denmark (a capital that did count!) We walked all over the old city, visited the palace (didn't see the Queen, but did see the changing of the guard) and let's not forget Tivoli Gardens, the Original Amusement park! The next stop was Stockholm, Sweden (another capital, which also counted), home of the Nobel Prize; we saw the recently opened museum dedicated to the prize. Pop quiz, which "prize" is not a "Nobel Prize"? The prize for Economics is sponsored by some Swedish bank, but is honored with all the other recipients. Now if you said the Peace prize… WRONG! The Nobel Peace Prize is one of the awards presented by the Nobel Trust, *but* it is done in Oslo, Norway (it was in Alfred Nobel's will that way and no one really knows why, at least that's their story and they're sticking to it!) We also walked around the old city in Stockholm, really neat old buildings; saw the Swedish Royal Palace, and this really cool resurrected 300 year old warship, the Vasa. The ship sank on her maiden voyage after less than an HOUR! They found it stuck in the mud at the bottom of the harbor in 1959, spent over 20 years stabilizing the structure and building a museum for it. It's the Swedish equivalent of our Smithsonian Air & Space Museum, the country's single largest attraction. Our next leg took us by overnight ferry from Stockholm to Helsinki, Finland (yes, another Northern European capital!) Finland? What is there to do there? Not much! We took a city tour that lasted about 2+ hours and saw all the high points (trust me, you haven't heard of any of them AND you can see ALL of them in that amount of time!) And of course we saw their capitol building, too! We were only in Helsinki for the day, as it was our jumping off point for the final leg of our journey (drum roll, please….) St. Petersburg, Russia (*one time* capital of Russia during the time of the czars!) Russia was much nicer than I expected, well at first appearance anyway, then we had our first meal at the hotel. There's a reason you don't see Russian restaurants on every other corner!!! I kid you not, they served the same dishes at breakfast the next morning as they had the night before at the aforementioned first meal, YUCK!

We had a tour guide, Lena, and car with a driver while in St. Petersburg. We saw all the sites and of course walked around quite a bit on our own (and we found one of only two McDonalds in St Pete… Thank Heavens!) We visited the graves of the czars, which included Peter the Great as well as the recently established new resting place of the last czar, Nickolas II. On our last day, we were taken out of town to see a "country palace" of Peter the Great's, in a village named Peterhof. On the way there we saw what most would consider the "real Russia", shocking! These people *were* considered a super power? Couldn't prove it by anything I saw! Enough of Europe, it was time to get home.

Back in *I-oh-way* we continued with the groundskeeping and projects around the house. I failed to mention previously the big house project for the summer; we removed the aluminum siding from one more side of the house so that we can restore the original cedar clapboard siding and shingles which still lay underneath. The hitch was when the al-u-min-ium (that's how the English say it, go figure!) was removed we saw what we already knew we would find… they had ripped off, literally, the bottom 3 course of shingles (the second storey is shingled, the first storey is clapboard). The reason is, in the original application the bottom courses are "kicked out" so that they flare out and since it is easier to side straight down, they unceremoniously removed the kick-out. Well, I showed them… I re-built it! In the mean time, Dick did the siding maintenance on the first storey. But with fall quickly coming to a close (WHERE does the time go!?!) the side of the house did not get painted to match the front. It'll still be there next Spring!

October came and went and November was here, and around here that means, what else, travels! The second week we took another trip to Memphis to celebrate another birthday, this time it was Dick's nephew Ryan's turn as he turned eleven! Now you may not believe this, but in all my trips to Memphis, I have never been to Graceland (well, not for a tour anyway; I have driven by the outside though.) Late November we were headed for a long weekend in New York City, where we met up once again with our friends Doug & Richard. Did all the tourist things: Statue of Liberty, Empire State Bldg, Ground Zero and general walking around along with several Broadway shows (sadly Letterman takes more months of advance planning to get in then we had, therefore no Dave, but we did see the Hello Deli, home of Rupert Gee!)

On a somber note, we also took time in November to travel to Williamsburg, VA where brother Bob and Family live. Regretfully, Bob's wife Jean lost her battle with cancer and we were there to attend her memorial service. It was very nice indeed and I think Jean would have approved, especially of the nice photo collage that Bob, the girls and Jean's siblings put together (do you remember what Bob's hair looked like when they first got married? HA!). It was touching and gave us all a chance to remember the good times. Jean was one of a kind, a real saint, I mean come on, she was married to my brother for 25 years, that's no easy task! **:)**

Well, Thanksgiving has passed, the HOLI-DAZED season is upon us and we are still working on home projects; our handyman has been back and is almost finished with the first floor "powder room" and if I can get this letter done, I may even get the dining room painted and papered before Christmas (that latter project has only been on-going for 1-1/2 yrs, no kidding! You can't rush into these things.)

Let me take this moment in closing to express our holiday greetings to one and all and wish everyone the very best during this Season and throughout the New Year. And lastly, take a moment to think a happy thought of Jean and pass on those prayers to Bob, Crystal, Melissa and the Millers.

Happy Holidays!

Mark & **Dick**

P.S. -- I am going to prepare you in advance for next year's "Holiday Season Letter Extraordinaire 2004"… look for it to be published on the web &/or sent by email. Which means of course, join us in the 21st Century and get the Net &/or email if you don't already have it! Hey! Why wait? Why don't you see what this one looks like on the Web.

Go to http://www.markspage.com and look for the "Holi-dazed Letter" link and while you're there drop me a line so I have your email address. By all means feel free to tell others about the letter ala Web too! The more the merrier. **And don't forget to send me those email addresses, too!!!**