Happy Holidays 2011

Have you been *good* boys & girls?

Well… you must have been, because you're receiving yet another *Holidazed Greeting* from Mark & Dick!

Let's see, hmmm… what happened in 2011? There was really nothing earth-shattering at the start of the year (as proof, the earth is still in one piece.)

I'm not going to tell you the weather was this-or-that, it was weather; snow, maybe a little ice and coooold. That would be winter in Iowa. And as has held true in years, nay, decades, nay-nay, centuries past, it was followed by spring, followed by summer, blah-blah-blah. Shoveled snow, planted plants, mowed grass, raked leaves, *rinse, repeat*.

Okay, just one weather related note… our neighbor's nearly 100-year-old Beech tree fell on our house! Okay, not so much on the house as next to it, and by "it" I mean the garage. We fixed the gutter & eve and resuscitated a smushed rhododendron bush and all is well.

And the neighbors? Well they trimmed the branches off… but the trunk is still laying there. Uh… maybe next spring, huh?

Visitor From Afar

March of 2011 saw a visit from Mark's Uncle Bob. A resident of Redwood City, California since the early 1960's, "Big Bob" (not to be confused with "Little Bob", Mark's brother) ***drove*** back to Iowa. Longish trip he reported, and relatively uneventful if you discount the "bear attack". The gathered I-Oh-wee-jun family members truly enjoyed the visit, we all hope Uncle Bob did as well!

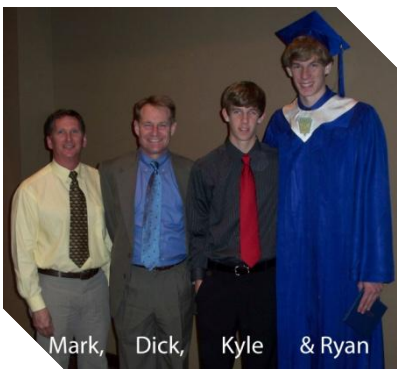
On a somber note…

We noted the passing of my step-father, Thomas F. Craig, Sr in June of this year. Married to my mother, Sharon, for 33 years, his health had declined the last couple years. He was 72 years old.

Altus Schola Graduate Est

(Another High School Graduate)

May of this year found Dick & Mark on the road to Memphis, Tennessee to see Nephew Ryan VanHoeck graduate from high school. This fall Ryan began classes at Rhodes College in Memphis where he will also be playing basketball (that extra height thing may be helpful!)



What Exotic Destination Was on Your Itinerary This Year? (i.e. Where's Waldo Gone?)

July 8-16, 2011, we were sailing the high seas, the Mediterranean Sea to be more specific. Déjà vu? Not exactly, but then again… sorta! We have done four other cruises which had us in the "Med", but this particular cruise had multiple new stops. Starting from Barcelona, Spain, we met up with long time travel friends Fred & Larry (Los Angeles, CA) and David & Daryl (Kansas City, KS), and our original cruise friends going back, what? 10 years now? More? Doug & Richard of Topeka, KS. But wait! Who's that in the lobby of the hotel checking out and heading to the ship? Alan & Dr. Dave! (Plattsburg, NY.)

(Sidebar) - On our last Med cruise in 2008 with D&R, we met Alan & David at Mont St Michel, France, and hung with them the rest of the cruise. A few emails back and forth after the cruise and we lost touch. What a pleasant surprise, of all the hotels in Barcelona that we could have chosen, we were at the same one! Not to mention the fact that we were checking out at the same time, ten minutes earlier or later we may have missed them altogether… we're glad we didn't!

We set sail from Barcelona headed to that tourist mecca of Northern Africa… NO, not Libya! Right next door in Tunisia, the ***original*** birthplace of the "Arab Spring" (what does that really mean anyway, "*Arab Spring*"?) Hot, really hot, like 115° F and very little if any A/C, some Carthaginian Ruins and not much else, including civil unrest, fortunately! Been there, done that, no reason to return. Back on the ship, we were headed back across the sea to Sicily, the isle being kicked by the "toe" of Italy.

Palermo, the major city of Sicily, was also hot, but not like Africa, and there was much more to see; the highlight was likely the tour of the Palermo Opera House… magnifique!

Next stop, Rome, well actually it was Civitavecchia, the nearest port to Rome. Here we jumped on a train and headed into the Eternal City for a day of self-guided sightseeing… St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Museum, numerous city squares and then it was back on the train (during rush hour!) to return to the port. The scheduled train was delayed and when it came it was *packed full* of commuters and it was HOT! We stood (and sweat) for nearly the full hour it took to get back to the port.

The next port o' call had us on another train to get to Pisa, home of that crooked tower, and boy is it! This train was much more pleasant and Pisa was great. I had never been there and it had been something like 20-25 years since Dick had been there. We were again on our own, which was good because others from the cruise that took the packaged shore excursion to Pisa did NOT get to go up in the famous Leaning Tower… we did!

The final stop before returning to Barcelona was in France, the port was Marseilles and you guessed it! We hopped a train, this time it was the high speed French TGV which whisked us off to Avignon at speeds over 200 MPH! For those who don't know, Avignon was the seat of the Catholic Church from approx 1300-1400 during the "Great Schism". We toured the *Palais de Papes* (Pope's Palace) and the nearby *Pont d'Avignon* (Bridge of Avignon), made famous by a French song "Sur le pont d'Avignon", a chart topper in its day… seriously! Back to the ship and to Barcelona where we parted ways with our travel companions and hopped a jet to the good ol' US-of-A via Amsterdam & Toronto en route to Chicago.

Top – Palermo Opera House

Middle – Ask any kid, they'll tell you… Leaning Tower of "Pizza"

Bottom – Pont d'Avignon

(Can you find "Waldo Dick" in two of the three pictures here?)

Summer drew to a close…

… and in September I made a trip to Cedar Rapids to assist Alice & Jim (Dick's parents) in setting up Alice's booth in the Eastern Iowa Quilt Show, where Alice was one of two ***featured quilters*** displaying many of her handcrafted quilts. The show was quite a success with attendees coming from as far away as Memphis, TN! Dick's sister Dee Ann came up from Memphis for a couple days, as well as an appearance en masse by several of Alice's nephews from Manchester, IA, with one spouse and multiple children in tow! Dick & I returned on the weekend to tour the whole show, as well as to assist with disassembly, load-up & transport back home of the plethora of quilts.

Also in September, Dick & I drove to Des Moines, IA, to go to the Iowa State Fair. The first time in 20+ years that either of us had been back to the fair. "*Our state fair is a great state fair*," as the song goes! We of course saw the famous Butter Cow (another sidebar – while on the cruise in the Mediterranean Sea we met a gentleman and when we told him we were from Iowa, he said he'd just been to Iowa, although he is not from Iowa!. It seems we were in the presence of the son-in-law of the famous Butter Cow Lady, the late Norma Duffy Lyon, who from 1959-2006, each year carved the life-sized cow out of butter for display at the Iowa State Fair… it's a small world after all!)

We did have one more small trip left in us for the year; in October we took a long weekend and flew out to Denver to visit an old friend, Brent, who previously lived here, but is from Colorado and returned there many moons ago. In Denver we checked out the "Unsinkable Molly" Brown's House Museum and took an afternoon to drive to nearby Rocky Mountains National Park. It was early October, but we still saw some snow in the park, along with a herd of elk which was drawing quite the crowd of tourists.

And as fall expired and the leaves began to fall (and fall, and fall, and they're still falling!) many birthdays were celebrated, but one of particular note passed… my 50th! It's near impossible to believe that I am now half-a-century old, but there's no denying the truth. The truth as told by my aching shoulder, bi-focal glasses and expanding waistline… but, as *they* say, it is better than the alternative! BTW, got Rosetta Stone – Italiano for my b-day, aspettare fino all'anno prossimo!

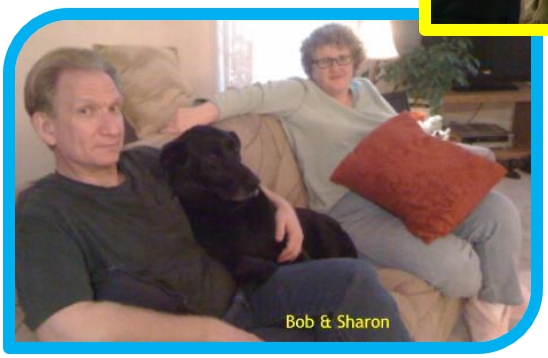
Which brings us ***near*** the end of this missive. With Thanksgiving just past, we enjoyed the holiday twice! Once on the weekend before when my brother Bob and his wife Sharon came over from Indiana and we gathered at my Mom's in Clinton for all the fixin's. And as a surprise treat, my mother had invited her Uncle Al down from Epworth, IA, to join us, but hadn't told any of us! Then on Thanksgiving day, we loaded into the car (SUV),

Above – Quilt Show, Cedar Rapids (L-R: Mark, Jim, Alice, Dick, & Dee Ann)

Right – The IA State Fair Cow o' Butter

Below – Bob & Sharon

Below – Rocky Mtn Nat'l Park



and drove to Manchester, IA, and partook of a wonderful dinner with Dick's parent's, three cousins and two spouses (Steve, Carolyn & Scott, and Elizabeth & Derek) all together along with, and at, his Aunt Sylvia & Uncle Mike's house.

It is now December, the tree is up, the outdoor lights are lit and most, well some, shopping is completed, and it is time wrap… *this up!* We hope your 2011 was a wonderful year and wish you all the best for the Holidays and throughout the upcoming New Year!

Merry Christmas!

Mark & Dick