

Wednesday, December 24, 2003

Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah, Joyous Kwanzaa, Happy New Year, Cool Solstice, Happy Ramadan, etc., to all. I know this is getting repetitious, but it has been another fabulous year. I hope your year has been as good.

Top news is a new granddaughter! Jillian Candice Scheef was born July 29, 2003. Her parents, David and Rita, are doing well. Jillian's big sister Taylor is now four and has grown in so many ways. I had forgotten what it's like to have a conversation with a four year old – maybe because my kids were boys.

Last year was unusually great for local skiing. I mentioned last year that we were out skiing in early December. Well that snow stayed on the ground until March! The late spring made it difficult to get the bicycles on the road, but skiing so close to home more than made up for it. Our ski trips included what have become standard – Craftsbury, VT, the week at Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, plus Killington in April.

This year Paula and I ran two trips for the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). In February we ran a ski trip to Jackson, NH. We had a great bunch of people and did some fun skiing. Jackson is an amazing place – the entire town is a cross country touring center with nearly 100 miles of trails (yes, that's miles – not kilometers) with the White Mountains and real back country looming out in the woods. Then, just for balance, we took sixteen people to Martha's Vineyard in July. We had great weather with three days of perfect sunshine and moderate island temperatures. Another great bunch of people (several came on both trips) made for a lot of fun.

Hiking is always high on our list and we did some awesome hiking. In July we met Paul Burton, Paula's dad, at Cardigan Lodge, an AMC facility in New Hampshire and climbed Mt. Cardigan. This is not a really big mountain but it has a bald top (due to a forest fire last century) and thus offers the hope of spectacular views. This hope is what keeps hikers moving up the trail. We knew when we started out that weather was moving into the area, so naturally we arrived at the summit in thick clouds. As soon as we opened our lunch we heard thunder, so we had to pack up and beat a hasty retreat down to the trees. The concept of being a lightning rod for a mountain is just not something I want to explore. After lunch a light rain started as we leisurely walked back down to the lodge. Paul was elated that he had climbed another mountain in as many years.

Also in the hiking category is the Upper Goose Pond (UGP) cabin. This was the third year that I've spent at least part of a week with Paula volunteering as a caretaker at the UGP cabin. While this is another AMC facility, it is unusual in that it is run entirely by volunteers. The cabin and surrounding land was donated to the U.S. Forest Service some years ago. The cabin is ½ mile off the Appalachian Trail (AT) in Lee, Mass. The cabin is rustic to an extreme (no electricity or running water) but to someone hiking the AT from Georgia to Maine, it's pure luxury. As caretakers, we monitor the cabin and the moldering privies, canoe water in from a spring across the pond, and collect a suggested donation of \$3 per nite from each hiker. In exchange for the donation, the hiker gets a dry bed (most have mattresses) and a pancake breakfast at 7am the next morning. We cook the pancakes on a propane stove. An AMC committee maintains the cabin using the donations to buy materials, so the entire facility is self-supporting.

What makes being a caretaker so much fun is meeting the people who pass thru. About three quarters of the people who stayed overnight at the cabin during our week were hiking the entire Appalachian Trail – all 2160 miles. About half of those are doing it all in one season (called a "thru hiker"). The others are "section hikers" who hike a part of the trail. Many of these people eventually hike the entire trail over a period of years. Since most thru hikers hike the trail from south to north, they have completed about two thirds of the trail when they reach UGP. Our week at UGP

for the past two years has been in early July so the thru hikers we see are on schedule to complete the trail by fall (they started in April). For the northbounders, the trail will get more and more rugged as they head into Vermont, New Hampshire and, finally, into Maine. The north end of the AT is the summit of Mt. Katahdin in central Maine and hikers must reach it by early October or the trail will be closed by weather. We see very few southbounders because they can't start until the trail opens in May. Last year's late spring delayed everything in Maine so the south-bounders we did see were the very first of the southbound pack.

Not everyone hikes the AT for the challenge and adventure. We met one couple who thought it would be a cheap way to spend the summer while they were between jobs and homes. The variety of people is endless and their stories are fascinating.

I'll skip our bicycling. Suffice it to say we did some riding. Paula keeps trying to get me into mountain biking and this fall I did more than a bit. Mountain biking is like skiing in that you need confidence to get good. Like any physical sport, it takes time to build that confidence and that means lots of miles bouncing over roots and rocks going up and down hills. We'll see...

Earlier I mentioned that David and Rita are doing well. Stephanie is busy applying to colleges and they made several trips to visit campuses in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. In the midst of all the happiness, Rita's mother, Candy, passed away just before Thanksgiving. Candy was a warm and giving person and was very close to her granddaughters, Stephanie, Taylor and Jillian. She will be missed.

In September Rob moved to Burlington, VT, to start a fascinating and challenging job clerking for Judge Parker, one of the judges of the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals. In October Judge Parker died unexpectedly. In a somewhat ironic twist, Rob was hired by a newly appointed judge of the 4th Circuit who has chambers in Raleigh, NC. So Rob packed up once again and is now getting settled in Raleigh to clerk for Judge Allison Duncan. Rob and I have great conversations discussing Supreme Court opinions. We were both amazed (and delighted) when they upheld the McCain-Feingold Bill.

Mom continues to be in good health and came out this fall to see some New England foliage. Unfortunately the trees would just not cooperate and gave us a rather lackluster show of color. Naturally, the visit included some quality time with her two great granddaughters. Most people never get to know any of their great grandparents. David was lucky enough to remember four. We want Taylor and Jillian to be able to tell their friends about their great grandma.

For the last two years I've been president of the Danbury Area Computer Society (www.dacs.org), a regional computer user group. The club has about 450 members, many of whom attend one or more of the twelve special interest groups. We publish a monthly newsletter, DACS.DOC (available on the web site), which varies from 16 to 24 pages. As president I get to make announcements at the general meetings and to write a monthly column for the newsletter. An easy way to find my articles (not exactly sure why you would want to do this) is to type "jim scheef -directors site:www.dacs.org" into Google (the '-directors' eliminates the minutes of our rather tedious director's meetings, while the site parameter limits the search to DACS). The present club is the result of the merging four computer enthusiast groups back in the 90's. I hesitate to say that I run the club, but being president is a fun job.

Well, that's about all the pretence I can muster for another year. May you all enjoy peace and joy in the traditions of your religious persuasions. For those without a religious persuasion, may you not be bothered by those who do. Have a great ski season and a safe 2004.

This letter will be available online at www.scheef-family.com with links to many of the topics. Let me know how you are; send email to jscheef@telemarksys.com.