

# Row, Row, Row Your Boat

(gently down the street!)

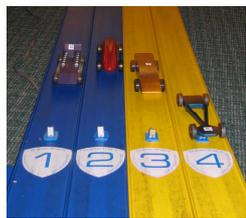
Water was a constant companion of ours in 2008. Like a member of the family, it came to us, stayed with us, surprised us, annoyed us, and never really left us. Sometimes, it's a good thing we love the members of our family, or we'd kill them.

It arrived as snow, though snow comes in many ways. In the Midwest, some years it rarely comes, teasing you with cold temperatures. The kids sit longingly by the window, while parents mumble that if it's going to be cold, there should at least be snow to make it worthwhile. Then, there are the snow "constipation" years, where it lets loose all at once and relishes bringing the community to a standstill for days. This year started out as the third kind, the lengthy snow. It might have dumped on us from time to time, but mainly it just kept falling. It snowed up until April, which boggles the mind. Oh, and when it snows so often, the Brain's, who are not exactly "get up a 6am and run their snowblower over the light dusting of fluff on the driveway" people, get behind. Seriously behind. The constant snowfall, punctuated by freaky icestorms, left us chipping ice from the driveway for weeks. Let's just say snow wore out its welcome this year.



prepared, and some guy 50 feet away alternates between pop flies and line drives of rolls to your seat. The visit would have been worthwhile just for the atmosphere and the novelty, but the food was superb and plentiful. Interestingly, it wasn't initially on our dinner plans, but Jim recognized "Sikeston, MO" while driving, and we held the kids off with snacks an extra hour to make it part of the trip. We highly recommend, though slippery fingers might want to bring a ball glove :-)

The snow followed us to Little Rock, AR, where Jim planned to visit an office location. No sooner had we arrived than Little Rock shut down the town. To us, it looked like a light dusting, but evidently that constitutes a snowstorm in Little Rock. Thankfully, we shook the snow as we rambled into



Against the white backdrop, life went on. 2008 started, as many years do, with Cub Scout Pinewood Derby planning. Bolstered by his 2007 1<sup>st</sup> place Pack and 1<sup>st</sup> place Council entry, Brent wanted to repeat his success in 2008. Slightly modifying the 2007 design, Brent took 2<sup>nd</sup> place in 2008. This was a relief to Cubmaster Jim, who didn't want the other parents thinking the race was staged. After

finding and fixing a bent axle (that caused a wheel to rub on the body), Brent went on to place 1<sup>st</sup> in the Council Derby this year as well. Not to be left behind, Belinda had her day as well, entering a car shaped like a ball gown and placing 1<sup>st</sup> in the "sibling" class.

While Jim busied himself helping with industrial design, Julie spent evenings creating a Civil War ball gown. One doesn't often get a chance to use a hoop skirt anymore, but it was an ideal event. A local group sponsors regular Civil War Ball events, where the dances are taught on the spot, no prior experience needed. For their part, Brent and Belinda enjoyed some of the dances, but the "potluck snack/cookie" table was an added incentive.

In March, we'd had enough of the snow, so we packed the camper and headed off to "The Great State of Texas" (It seemed to us Texans are required to say it that way, under penalty of incarceration. Possibly, they are just proud of their state, but I like the jail sentence explanation better). Along the way, we stopped at "Lambert's Cafe", home of the "Thrown Rolls". Yes, you know how it works. You take a seat, you order your folks bring around big bowls of appetizers while the meal is



Houston. We parked the RV at the home of Jim's friends for a few days (Thanks, Mark and Cori!) and took in the sights, including the Johnson Space Center. After that, we headed south to Corpus Christi and the Padre Island National Seashore, staying right on the sandy seashore for a few days. Honestly, between White Sands National Monument (I promise, Mr. Park Ranger, we **TRIED** to leave all of the federally protected sand there, we really did!) and Padre Island, sand still oozes from the camper. In San Antonio, Julie and the kids visited The Alamo, while Jim joined the family for dinner and a taxi ride on the famous Riverwalk. Then, it was on towards Dallas, via Austin.

Let's stop and interject here. The Brain RV excursions often seem haphazard to the "planner" type folks in the audience, but that's what makes them special. To wit: for those not in the know, Brazilian Steakhouses offer a huge salad bar and a small plastic chip on the table with two sides, red and green. One flips the chip to green to signal the "gaucho chefs" to visit the table with 15-20 different meats on spits. The diner requests a specific cut, the chef slices the meat, and the diner uses the provided tongs to move the selection to his or her plate. While the chip is green side up, chefs arrive at your table on a regular basis, probably every 3-5 minutes. As well since someone is always at the table, water and drinks are refilled constantly. Beware, it's even more dangerous than a buffet. At a buffet, your lack of motivation to get up and visit the buffet sets a food intake threshold. Here, you can eat yourself under the table without ever leaving it. So, with that in mind, let's continue the story.

As Julie drove north into Austin, Jim, working on the computer, spotted a billboard for "Fogo de Chao", a Brazilian Steakhouse. He also noted they have a reduced price lunch offering. Jim and Julie have regaled friends (and the children) with stories from their 2007 Florida visit, and Jim felt the kids would enjoy the experience. So, instead of an RV lunch, Jim parked the camper in downtown Austin, and the family of 4 in shorts and T-shirts hit Fogo de Chao for lunch (we asked for a dress code, they claimed it was casual. Saying we stuck out was an understatement). After salad, we flipped the chips to green, and life became interesting very quickly. Brent eagerly starts his meal. He tried new cuts of meat, giving his opinion on each one. For her part, Belinda was too young to really participate, so Julie selected a few options for her. Then, we started to notice Brent getting flustered. The constant chef visits with an accompanying request and the drink replenishment have simply overwhelmed him to the point he cannot think. Exasperated, he searched for some way to regain control, concern showing from his eyes, until we explained he could simply flip his chip to red temporarily to calm down the action. The look of relief in his face after things slowed brought tears to the eyes. Later, we found out he was afraid to flip the chip to red for fear he'd hurt the chefs' feelings.

After an eventful lunch, we dined and visited with Mark and Sarah Luttrell and family north of Austin, before heading up towards the last leg of our trip

in Dallas/Ft. Worth. The family enjoyed the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing and the Ft. Worth Zoo, staying overnight in the Cabella's parking lot as Easter approached. Jim spent some time in the Bedford office on Friday and was invited to Easter services and dinner by a colleague. So, miles away from home, we enjoyed a fine Easter service and a wonderful meal, complete with an egg hunt for the kids. We then traded the camper for a few days for a hotel while Jim attended some business meetings in Dallas, and headed back home via Kansas City, visiting with the Bolin family before arriving to more snow as the calendar flips to April.

In May, we hit the road again, combining a late April trip to Chicago IL and a mid May trip to Louisville into a 3 week rambling excursion. After a quick stop in the Chicago area, we high tailed it to Indianapolis to take care of Julie's nephew and niece while Julie's brother Rick and sister-in-law Karen spent some time in the UK. We left Indy on Sunday enroute to a favorite KY locale, Natural Bridge State Park, where we relaxed for a while, arriving back in Louisville the next weekend for a trip to the Louisville Slugger Factory and a walk on the waterfront. After Jim's meetings concluded on Wednesday, we stopped back by Indianapolis to see Rick and Karen and see how badly we handled things (We found Julie's niece is allergic to Toby, so letting him sleep on her bed now seems like a bad idea.)



As I write this, they are still recovering, and will be for years.

After things settled down in August, we took a quick Minneapolis trip to visit the traveling "Star Wars" memorabilia exhibit and the Mall of America. We spent some time at the indoor amusement park, dropping back into Decorah, IA for the annual Father-Child Homeschool canoe trip. Since it's a "Mom-Free" event, Julie hid in the camper throughout the weekend while the kids canoed down the Upper Iowa River.

In September, it's "carved faces" time, according to Belinda.



On our way to Mt. Rushmore, we posed by "Albert, the World's Largest Bull" sculpture in Audobon, IA, parked the RV all night and enjoyed the beach (Yes. A beach. In Nebraska) at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala, and visited "Carhenge" in Alliant, NE. In addition to viewing Mr. Rushmore, we stayed at an RV Park just outside Crazy Horse Memorial and happened to be in town for a "night blast". There were many highlights on the trip, but we created highlights for others the day we left the RV at the campground and traveled the "Needles Highway" in our truck. Note our truck is a dually, and the Needles are so named because there are a number of "eyes" carved through the rock the road travels through. One such "eye" measured 7'8" wide, and the truck is 7' wide. We pushed the mirrors in, decided the fenders were probably going to



get hurt, and forged ahead with 2-4" of spare on each side of a 25' long truck. I don't think we'll ever forget the look of the couple in their subcompact car traveling the other direction as we emerged from the rock formation. As I recall, the lady was gasping with her hand over her mouth and the male driver was pumping his fist in the air through the window. I also seem to remember an impromptu crowd looking through the eye from the other side in admiration as we cleared it and went on our way. The truck came through without a scratch.



Normally, we leave Cedar Rapids to find adventure, but it came to us in June. It's one thing to read accounts of natural disasters in other areas of the country, lamenting the losses and wondering about the folks. It's another to see it unfold right in your hometown, watching news about your community lead CNN and other national news sources. Yes, our friend the water stopped by. It brought friends. I don't think anyone who traveled by Mays Island (Cedar Rapids has an island in the middle of the river where the courthouse and jail are located) that week in mid-June will ever forget seeing the water overcome the three roads to the island, forget seeing the water lap at the the bottom of the Dairy Queen sign on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue (I'm sure the signs are the same height all over the US, look at one sometime), forget seeing the aerial video of the downtown area, resembling more a lake with roofs jutting up at times, or forget seeing boats patrolling the downtown streets. Jim's office is now on the south end of town, and he's attending demonstrations that week.



When disaster was called on Friday, the office was shut down, and there's a sudden realization that only 2 paths connect him to home, both of which are being prepared for closure. As the river crested, ¾ of the city water capacity disappeared, ironically making water a scarce commodity. The RV, up till now mainly an item of leisure, became a partial lifeboat, a source of hot showers and restroom facilities. Luckily, the rains and the deluge of water spared us any damage, but others near us endured flooded basements and related issues.

Water greeted us as we returned home, this time in the basement. All of the carpets in the utility room (just remnants thrown down to cover the concrete) were soaked, but no other basement carpet showed a hint of water. While initially at a loss, Jim determined the issue as he sat in the basement working the following Monday and was greeted by a cascading shower of water from the basement ceiling. Above in the laundry room, Julie had started a load of travel clothes, and the washer decided to forego shutting off the water when full. After some mopping/drying and a quick diagnosis from the repairman that we'd be better off getting a new unit, we shopped for new appliances and selected bold, red, front loader windowed LG units. For their part, Jim and the kids sat in the laundry room and watched the first load go into the spin cycle after being told the clothes would spin at 1400 RPM on the fastest setting. Julie watched the rest of the family stare in awe at spinning clothes. It kept them occupied for a good half hour, though. They truly are nice units, but the family kids Julie because they play little songs when they finish a cycle.



Oh, look, water has reappeared in town. It's white again, and they are predicting large amounts of it this year. We're shuttling Belinda to Ballet lessons and Brent to Tae Kwon Do, but if you call and we don't answer, we're probably just outside trying to stay ahead of the weather.

Merry CHRISTmas,

Jim, Julie, Brent, Belinda, and Toby  
(Grab a color copy at [www.jbrain.com/christmas](http://www.jbrain.com/christmas))