

# Going “South” for the Winter

**News flash:** In spite of the word ‘south’ in the name, South Dakota is not remotely warm in the Winter. I know, I know, you’re as shocked at the misleading state name as I am. Together, we’ll sort this out, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

We rang in the New Year in Utica, IL, at Grizzly Jack’s Indoor water park and amusement park with Jim’s folks and his sister and her family. It’s become a bit of a tradition, to gather at a midpoint location to celebrate. Belinda became an “Upwards” cheerleader, though Brent decided to forego playing on a team in the league this year. In March, Jim took the kids to IL again for University of Illinois’ College of Engineering’s Engineering Open House (EOH). Jim participated in EOH when in college, so it was nice to see it from a spectator’s point of view. Towards the end of the month, we traveled to Kansas City to visit friends (Hi Bolin’s!) and celebrate Jim’s birthday. While there, we ate at a favorite restaurant, Fritz’s in downtown Crown Center, where the food arrives on an automated train!

To combat the normalcy creeping steadily into our lives, we opted to put the house on the market again (our first attempt in late 2007 had been thwarted by the housing market collapse – **the NERVE!**), and Jim decided to seek new employment opportunities. The ball we thus started rolling in February came hurtling back at us mid-June. After noting the color schemes of model homes, painting the entire interior the color of mud (truly, they should call the color “Essence of Wet Dirt”) and replacing the perfectly good (and expensive), but dated, brass fixtures with cheap “oiled brass” ones that looked dirty right from the box, showings picked up (the pre-soiled look must be in now). About the same time, Jim went off to interview for a position out of state.

Well, when it rains, it pours (or sprays all over the car seats through the open sunroof, but that’s a story for another time). An offer came in the same day as the interview, one we ultimately accepted (though we almost didn’t bother, given its lowball nature. Hey buyer, we’re eager, but not desperate!). At this point, we’ve sold the house, we’ll need to move everything out by July 19, we don’t know where to send it, we don’t know if Jim will be offered a new position, and thus we don’t know in which state we’ll be living in a month. Mere trivialities! **True story:** Making last minute home repairs, we notice the upstairs bathroom “gurgles” when the new toilet is flushed. Enter the plumber, who says the toilet is too “good”, and the flush action is swamping the vent, forcing air to be pulled through the other plumbing in the bathroom. Result: the gurgle. He suggests buying a cheaper toilet. C’mon! Are we REALLY being penalized for putting in a non-crappy toilet? Jim, ever the resourceful one, plays musical toilets, swapping an old one from the master bath into the kid’s bath. Two wax rings and a few confused glances from the offspring later, problem solved.

Weeks later, we found ourselves in Chicago for Jim’s second round of interviews (the company is not in the Windy City, but its parent company has offices there). While



mowing the lawn, the lawnmower was already packed), we drove the SUV loaded with temporary housing essentials to a friend’s house (thanks Jim and Wendy!), and we finally sat in the driveway in Big Blue (the Ford F350) with the truck camper staring and saying goodbye to the only home the children had ever known.

As an aside, Allied Van Lines is now re-acquainted with Jim’s expert packing abilities. When they came for the estimate, both Jim and Julie questioned the man who arrived, believing the \$25K for packing and moving would not cover the contents. He assured them both not only was it enough, Allied guaranteed it would not cost any more. Well, when the actual packers came, they quickly determined what Jim and Julie already knew: Jim has a lot of “junk”! While one man packed the rest of the house in 2 days, it took 1 man 2 days to pack the

garage, and 1.5 guys 2 days to pack Jim’s basement “man cave”. Of the 27,000 pounds of Brain items, the adult male packrat lays claim to 20,000 pounds of it.



Jim scheduled his new position to start August 16<sup>th</sup>, a month away. Effectively homeless and jobless, we took a 2 week trip to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, meeting up with Julie’s brother and family for the first week of the trip. We camped in Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, the kids played on the beaches (Lake Superior is **COLD!**) and walked on shipwreck remains washed ashore, and we all took in the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. During the

second week, we headed once again to the Keweenaw Peninsula, home of no fast food joints, not a **single** Wal-Mart (Well, there goes our free RV camping option), and the “Jam Pot”, purveyor of the cinnamon bread Jim got drunk on last time we traveled this way. You scoff, but Jim (who evidently can’t handle his liquored bread) started seeing double and feeling dizzy after downing a few slices of the **VERY** moist bread from the bakery, afterwards noting the significant alcohol content is stated right on the packaging. Who would have guessed? This time, we were better prepared, but Jim and Julie ended up having to steer Belinda away from some muffins for the same reason. No joke! Cell phone towers (and thus service) are sparse there as well, forcing Jim to use a payphone for the first time in 4 years.

We meandered back to Cedar Rapids via Wisconsin, detouring through Oshkosh so Brent and Jim could visit the huge air show there. Both times we passed through Madison, we stopped at Ella’s Deli, a “must-visit” for adults and kids alike. The food is good, and the atmosphere is second to none.



With no home in Cedar Rapids, we parked the “house” at the city RV



there, we took in the Sears Tower Sky Ledge and found the Weinermobile!. Days after, an employment offer negotiated and accepted, Jim tendered his resignation on July 1 (allowing health benefits to stay in effect for the entire month). The movers arrived on July 12<sup>th</sup>, the final box went into the truck on July 16 (it took **1.5** semi trailers ☺), we turned the keys over on the 17<sup>th</sup> (thanks Bolte boys for



park for a few days while we attended to last minute details (Among other things, Jim and Brent drove to Independence, IA and saw the largest tractor in the world, Big Bud) and picked up our other vehicle. Then, we bid adieu to the city and the Brain caravan made its way to Omaha. There, we took in McKenna’s BBQ (highly recommended!) with friends and stayed overnight at their home, our Nebraska residence (thanks Jim



and Dori!). It was almost impossible to recognize, they having made so many exterior changes over the last decade (though Jim's "mega"-deck was still attached to the rear!).

With one week before the new position started, we headed for temporary housing in Sioux Falls. Normally, companies provide temporary furnished apartments, but our dog Toby presented a challenge this time. Evidently, SD temporary housing folks don't like animals, so we ended up at the Residence Inn. We suffered in our 2 bedroom extended stay abode through breakfast every day, dinner 3 nights a week, maid service, 1 minute walk to the Sioux Empire Mall, pool and hot tub usage, and a monumental number of "Marriott Rewards Points". Suffering alongside the family, Jim started his new position, Director of Enterprise Architecture, at CNA Surety Corporation.

House selection was aided by owning no home and Sioux Fall's unprecedented rainfall during August and September, allowing houses with water issues to be crossed off the list more easily. We'd winnowed the



list to 3 by early September, and we put in an offer on our first choice: a 13 acre horse setup sporting a 2000 sq ft ranch with finished basement and a 30'x60' machine shed. Our offer was already above our range, and when they

countered, we walked away. Second up: a 9 acre lot with a rundown 1200 sq/ft ranch rental home and no outbuildings. We'd viewed it the first weekend in SD, deciding the house was beyond restoration. We now decided it might work as a "lifeboat" for a few months while another structure went up. The realtor noted it was still available, though it had 3 outstanding offers. Jim had noticed structural issues with the foundation during the walkthrough, issues which were holding up financing for some of the offers. However, we felt they could be addressed or mitigated. With nothing to lose, we put in an all-cash offer with no contingencies. Remarkably, they accepted with no counter-offer.

We immediately began remedial work. Hardwood flooring issues were tackled, ruined tile was removed, filthy carpet was pulled and the single (Yes, **SINGLE!**) bathroom was cleaned and prepped, including replacement of the tiny, wall-hung, cast iron lavatory sink. The kitchen cabinetry, most recently functioning as "Mouse Holiday Inn", was removed, the walls were stripped to the studs on 2 sides and re-drywalled. After hearing stories about daily trips to Menards while renovating the Nebraska home, the children now experienced it firsthand. Cheap cabinets, cheap tile squares, \$.39/sq ft carpet (with attached pad ☺), and cheap tools (some were packed in the moving trucks) made their way to the house (do you see a trend here?). Given only the washer and dryer came to SD, we scoured Craigslist and FreeCycle ads for a used dishwasher, oven, refrigerator, and microwave. All the while, we lived in the RV parked in front of the house, not unlike people crowding around a 13" television that sits atop a non-functional console TV.



The movers arrived at the end of September to stuff 3000 sq/ft of furnishings (and Jim's 20K of junk) into our new home. The poor moving guys had to lug all of the heavy and bulky garage items to the attic (luckily possessing an actual floor) via tiny stairs, and the rest to the basement. By the time they left, there was nary a spot to move in the little house.

Given the return to a desk job, the commute into work, and the cramped quarters of the city parking garage, the diesel chugging F350 was ill equipped as a commuter vehicle. Jim knew what he wanted, a vehicle he'd first seen in Canada in 2004, a time when we had neither the space nor the need for another auto. Now, though, the only concern: Would Jim fit in one? After a test drive at an Omaha dealer during our brief



Weighing in at 1950# and not even 9 foot in length (it will fit in our truck bed with the tailgate down), it sips gas (41MPG), and can handle the 75 MPH SD Interstates with ease. The kids beg to ride home with Dad (one at a time, of course), it sparks conversations wherever he drives, but the neighbors probably shake their heads at us when they see it.



stay, he acquired a used 2009 model from an online dealer in Pennsylvania shortly afterwards. Unlike our truck purchase, where Jim flew to Orlando and drove it back, the dealer arranged to ship it here. The car: a red smart™ ForTwo convertible, of course!

Having lived in Omaha, NE for a few years, we assumed Sioux Falls would be very similar. **WRONG!** There's a Western-wear store at the Mall, small talk includes hunting season calendar discussions and accounts of favorite hunting locations, and an entire spread of finger foods at a party will likely include no domesticated animal meats. While they show soccer in other states, Scheel's All Sports advertises shotgun shells on the Interstate billboard here, and we're assuming there's an entire state membership to the NRA. Interstate billboards teach children about helmets and "leathers", while warning the annual Sturgis Bike Rally pilgrims about the dangers of "unprotected" hog-riding.

That brings us up to the present. Brent continues saxophone lessons, with Julie as his teacher. Brent has also found a new Boy Scout troop, both he and Belinda are enjoying youth group activities and the extra-curricular activities sponsored by the Sioux Falls area homeschooling groups (there are two of them), and Belinda starts dance lessons in January. They've also both joined the homeschooling 4-H club. During warmer weather, they both found a nice climbing tree on the property, which masquerades as a ship or a fort, depending on the mood and the movie we have most recently watched. Julie struggles bravely with a kitchen far too small for her needs, whipping up fine cuisine and baked delights in spite of the facilities, while the family adjusts to a single restroom. We all watch snow fall outside the window, reveling in the fact there are no sidewalks to clear and no neighbors to complain about the uncleared driveway. As it falls, we just pack it down by driving over it. Rebels that we were, we also didn't bag our leaves this year. Living on the edge, we are!



We'll probably burn out the furnace blower motor this winter, as the house has little, if any, wall insulation (though, to be fair, most parts are no colder than the house in Cedar Rapids, which is truly sad). It's cozy, though you can now at least walk through the house. We'll hole up until Spring, when we can build something else and save the nice flooring and trim from the existing structure. Ironically, even though we're miles from any town, we do not long for digital communication. Cell phone service is available, and we have 10Mbps fiber-optic Internet service to the house (who knew? It's faster than the service we had in Iowa!) So, feel free to call us or drop us a line via email (or Facebook, if you prefer).

Merry CHRISTmas,

Jim, Julie, Brent, Belinda, and Toby

[www.ibrain.com/christmas/](http://www.ibrain.com/christmas/)  
[www.facebook.com/jim.brain1](http://www.facebook.com/jim.brain1)

P.S. Rereading the letter, I agree it's a bit wild. Often, one doesn't realize the incredible nature of events while living through them. Strange as it's been, though, it has truly been an adventure.