

Summer Vacation

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My husband and I are high school teachers. Dave teaches history and I teach math. We live in Minneapolis and have two children, Ben who is 11 and Josey (short for Josephine) who is 8. We go on a three-week family camping vacation every summer. We travel by car pulling our small pop-up camper. Last summer we circumnavigated Lake Superior, visiting amazing national, state, and provincial parks in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario. It was a wonderful trip that we were all still talking about at Christmas.

During this last school year, Josey's second-grade class spent pretty much the entire school year studying how the United States became a nation and preparing for this summer's 250th anniversary celebration of this great event. Nearly every day, Josey would tell us something she learned in her class about the 13 Colonies, the King of England, and the American Revolution. We heard a lot from her about what happened in Boston — the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere's Ride, the Shot Heard Around the World, the Battle of Bunker Hill, Samuel Adams' excellent beer, and Abigail Adams' wonderful letters from Braintree, Massachusetts.

Josey kept telling us that her teacher said all Americans should celebrate the coming 250th anniversary in some way. She suggested — I must say quite vigorously for an 8-year old — that we should visit Boston for our summer vacation. I was really proud of how she expressed her opinion. I think Dave was proud of her too. I thought that we owed it to her to find a way to incorporate Boston into our vacation plans.

When Dave and I talked about Josey's idea, he noted the unfortunate fact that driving from Minneapolis to Boston would take three days, and so the round trip would take six days, almost one third of our three-week trip. Dave reminded me that he and I needed a summer camping trip to chill out after a long, stressful year of teaching.

This year was extra stressful due to all the horrible shenanigans performed by ICE in Minneapolis. Dave, usually alone but sometimes with me, participated in many counter-ICE protests and worked in all kinds of ways to help the people ICE was pursuing, particularly the Somali community. Dave and I both had a large number of Somali kids in our classes. Although these kids were American citizens and children of American citizens, they were being told quite clearly that they were “garbage” and had no right to be in the United States. Many of these kids, the first and second graders

most notably, were under more stress than they could handle. This whole sad story, having followed the COVID disaster, made it nearly impossible for us teachers to give our students the help and support they needed.

Dave said he needed a long break and Boston was a destination too far. We didn't really know what we were going to do. But then Dave made an important discovery!

I should tell you now that Dave is the ultimate history buff. He likes everything about history, but he is absolutely enamored by military history. He had all the Avalon Hill war board games as a kid, has read all the big books like Shelby Foote's three-volume *The Civil War*, has dragged us to more battlefields than I can count, and at dinner parties he enthusiastically talks about the ideas and actions that Thucydides presents in his masterful *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

On our second date, Dave asked me what is my favorite American war. I didn't know what to say. I certainly had no favorite wars. I said with a bit of sharpness, "I don't really like war!" — which I hoped would have ended the discussion. However, Dave went on to tell me how much he liked military history. I told him that I really didn't know much about military history, but many people related to me had significant military experiences. I said I had a relative who was a general for the Union Army in the Civil War, one who was an admiral in the U.S. Navy in the late 1800s, and several relatives who fought in World War II including my grandfather Sam and his brother Uncle Larry who were both highly decorated.

This fired up Dave's interest like putting liquid oxygen on a charcoal grill. He started asking all kinds of questions. I told him that I knew very little about these relatives except for Grandpa Sam and Uncle Larry who were both still alive then and whom I knew quite well. I told him that Grandpa Sam was an officer in the 101st Airborne Division who parachuted behind enemy lines on D-Day and fought with his men across France and Germany and that Uncle Larry was a B-25 pilot who participated in a one-way mission soon after Pearl Harbor in which his crew took off from an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, bombed Japan, crashed landed in Manchuria, escaped from the Japanese, and joined and fought with Chiang Kai-shek's army until the end of the war. Dave was thunderstruck. All he could say was, "Are you telling me that one was in Band of Brothers and the other was on the Doolittle Raid!"

It turned out that this second date didn't keep us from falling in love. We got married and Dave got to meet Grandpa Sam and Uncle Larry, who he said were two of the most intimidating men he had ever met, despite both of them being well into their 90s. I learned that it was not a good idea to bring up all my war relatives in conversations with Dave. He was fascinated, of course, but also deeply jealous of the fact that I had so many and he had not even one.

This changed a couple years ago when he found on the web an obituary of one of his great-great-grandmothers that said she was a Daughter of the American Revolution. This meant that Dave had a direct ancestor who fought in the American Revolution. It took more than a year for Dave to track down who this illustrious ancestor was. He was a 7th great-grandfather named Issac Weatherby, but Dave didn't know much about him. Neither where he was born nor where he died. He did find out, however, that he fought in the famous "across-the-Delaware" battles of Princeton and Trenton.

Last spring on the PBS News Hour, Dave watched a story about the Ohio's Revolutionary War Veterans Graves Project to "locate, document, and preserve the final resting places of the state's earliest veterans ahead of the nation's 250th anniversary." Dave, of course, wondered if Isaac Weatherby could have been buried in Ohio. So he went to the Project's web site, typed in "Issac Weatherby", and — to his utter amazement! — a record appeared that included Isaac's birth and death dates, the Ohio county in which he was buried, the name of the cemetery, the GPS coordinates of his grave site, information about his grave marker, and a comment about how to get to the cemetery. Dave's 7th great-grandfather — a hero of the American Revolution — was buried in a little cemetery in Richmond County, Ohio! Dave was one happy man!

Dave and I decided that we absolutely had to find a way to visit Grandpa Isaac's grave as part of our summer vacation. We thought we could take a circular camping trip through Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and then back to Minnesota. We could see the museums, architecture, and Brookfield Zoo in Chicago, Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, the great state parks along the way, and most importantly the final resting place of Isaac Weatherby in Ohio.

We had a family meeting with the kids to discuss our plan. They had no objections at all. (They are still young enough to think that every idea their parents have is a great idea.) Josey and Ben were both extremely excited by the plan to visit their 8th great-grandfather's grave — which, according to Josey, fully filled our obligation to do something special for the 250th anniversary.

We started our vacation just after the July 4th celebration. We had a superlative time. The camp sites were great, the kids loved Chicago and "seeing America", and Dave and I had some quality time for relaxing and winding down. We were all looking forward to visiting the cemetery in Richmond County, a sparsely populated county in the middle of nowhere.

We planned to arrive at the cemetery after lunch, spend the afternoon there, and then drive to a campground a couple hours away. The comment in Isaac's grave record said that the main road to the cemetery, coming from the south, was impassable due to a bridge that was washed away several years

ago. Dave wondered why the bridge hadn't been replaced. Fortunately, the cemetery was also accessible via an unimproved road coming from the north.

The northern road was difficult to find and was a road more dirt than gravel. Yet we were excited as we drove slowly on it. We only passed one house, a dilapidated farm house, part of an even more dilapidated farm with discarded vehicles and farm equipment everywhere. Soon after the farm, we arrived at the cemetery which was small and in great disrepair. We got out of the car and the four of us all ran in different directions looking for Isaac's grave.

Dave found it first and, before we could even join him, he had his Nikon out ready to start taking pictures. But just at that moment, we heard someone say in a stentorian voice, "Hey you!" We all looked and saw a man walking down the road towards us carrying a shotgun. He was wearing overalls made of some kind of recycled flimsy material. The overalls were covered with rips and patches. The man was very old with some wispy white hair on his head and white stubble on his face. He was wearing ancient-looking glasses with one lens replaced by a black disk. He appeared to be more ghost than human.

Before we had a chance to think, he said words I will never ever forget: "You stupid cock-sucking hill of shit! Get off my property!" And then immediately he pointed his gun at Dave and pulled the trigger. A shotgun charge went over his head, sending down leaves and small branches. Josey started a kind of screaming I had never heard her do before. Dave yelled, "Everyone get in the car now!" I ran to get Josey who was screaming louder and louder. I got her into the back seat of the car and jumped in with her. Ben and Dave were already in the car.

I could feel my chest constricting. I asked Dave, "How can we turn around and get past him to get to the road?" Before I got out my question, Dave was driving fast through the cemetery. He ran over several tombstones. Josey was still screaming, and Ben was crying and praying. I looked back at the old man and he was preparing to shoot again. I yelled, "Everyone down!", and we heard the shotgun go off, apparently just over the car.

By this time, Dave had reached the southern road and was driving as fast as he could. The car and camper were bouncing as if we were on a trampoline. Suddenly the remains of the washed-out bridge was right before us. Dave went left, and without hesitation, gunned the engine and drove through a small creek. Our momentum took us across the water, but we slowed to a stop just before reaching the other shore with our wheels spinning wildly. Then, by the grace of God, the front wheels hit the shore and they pulled our car, our camper, and us four out of the creek.

When we got to the first main road, we stopped and took a look at the car and camper. Both were covered with mud. I told Dave that we had

to report what happened to the County Sheriff, and he shook his head yes. Using my phone I determined that the Sheriff's office was in Richmond Hill, the county seat of Richmond County. We were about to get back in the car and head off when Ben noticed that the trailer hitch was severely bent and had a crack that went two-thirds across the hitch.

Dave and I figured that our best choice was to drive slowly towards Richmond Hill and hope we could find a service station that could repair the trailer hitch. We came to a gas station after a few miles. The manager said he couldn't repair it, but he told us there was a small auto repair shop about a mile away. We went there and the person working in the shop said he could easily fix the hitch by cutting out the crack, bending the two parts of the hitch back in place, and then welding the parts back together. He said it would cost us \$50. Dave told him to go ahead, and the man finished in less than an hour. We were amazed at the quality of the work. I told Dave to give the man \$100, which Dave happily did.

We then drove to Richmond Hill and found the Sheriff's office. It was about 5:00 PM and fortunately the Sheriff was still in the office. He was younger than we expected, about our age. We told him what happened, and he said he knew about the cemetery, how some Revolutionary soldier was buried there, and how the online record about the soldier didn't mention that the cemetery was on the property of a man named Harold Witz. He said that we were trespassing on Witz's property and Witz had a right to protect himself under the Ohio "No Duty to Retreat" act. Hearing such talk would normally get Dave on a lecture approaching a rant that starts with a review of the relevant parts of the U.S. Constitution.

Although agitated, Dave was silent. I said, "We were not threatening the old man. Just the opposite: He was shooting at us." The Sheriff then asked if any of Witz's shots hit us. When I said no, he said that Witz has been shooting at people trespassing on his farm since well before any of us were born and he has never hit anyone. I said, "You are the Sheriff. Why don't you put a stop to this crazy old man shooting at people." He said, "If I tried to do that, there is a good chance I or one of my deputies would get hurt. It is better and far safer to wait until the old geezer dies." When Dave heard that he jumped up, thanked the Sheriff, and told me let's get out of this crazy county.

We went back to the car where Josey and Ben were. Dave looked shell-shocked, so I insisted on driving. When we got to the campground, it was dark and Dave was almost catatonic. I set up the camper, gave Dave a beer, made something to eat, and then got us all to bed.

The next day we drove to Indiana Dunes National Park. We had a lovely time on the beach and climbing the dunes. No one said anything about the altercation with Mr. Witz.

The day after that we started our drive back to Minneapolis, staying one night near Madison, Wisconsin. Dave and I went to college at the University of Wisconsin (under the Minnesota-Wisconsin Tuition Reciprocity Agreement which allowed us to pay in-state tuition). Madison is one of our most favorite cities. We went to the Student Union on campus, and Dave and I shared a pitcher of beer at the Terrace on the shore of Lake Mendota while Josey and Ben watched the boats sailing on the lake.

This was the first chance we had to talk about the incident with Witz. I asked Dave if he got any pictures of Grandpa Isaac's tombstone. He got just one, but it wasn't very good. He told me the day at the cemetery was as bad as any day he could remember. He had never been as disappointed nor more afraid for his family that day. I asked him if he would want to go back sometime in the future. He said no with a deep sadness in his voice. I told him, "I'm going back and hope you will come with me — just as soon as the old geezer dies." When I said this, Dave broke into a smile that he tried mightily hard to suppress.

We attempted several times to talk to Josey and Ben separately about what happened. Josey always refused to talk or listen, while Ben always acted like it was no big deal and there was nothing much to talk about. He did say something both obvious and profound: "Some people should not have guns."

When school started in September, Josey's new teacher asked her third-grade students to write about their summer. Josey didn't tell us anything about this, but one day she gave us a one-page story she wrote with a big A on the top of it and the title "The Scariest Day of My Life." She wrote that in one day three super scary things happened to her. First, a crazy man tried to shoot her father dead two times but missed each time. Second, the whole family with their car and camper almost drowned in a creek. And third, the sheriff said her parents were trespassing and the family escaped when the sheriff tried to arrest them. She ended with the sentence "This day was a very bad day, but the vacation was a very good vacation."