

Westward, H0!

OK... Mare and I will soon be on our way to the state of ILL in America Country. I have Vera loaded up with directions along with mapquest printed directions, hotel check in sheet, and printed tickets (Justin Case), and cell phone. Mare had to work last night and just called and told me she would be here soon! WHHO HHH0000!

Last night's audition went well. I listed all the male roles I could think of (the adult ones, anyway). I still think I could pass as one of the Bailey children. I did forget another role, that of Mr. Martini who is an Italian immigrant who has a traveled to America with his a wife. That a could a be fun!

Lots of people came out. LOTS of kids. Squirmy and his daughter came up and he read well. But Jade... OMG... if ever there was a heartwarming, scene stealer... I think it would be very hard to find a more adorable Zuzu. Results Sunday night. Read-through hopefully next Thursday.

The magic directional box

I've been using my GPS in a rather mundane way recently. I know the route I want to take, but I turn the GPS on anyway. Even though it never takes me the route or direction I normally go, it does keep very good track of my arrival time. That way I know if I have time to make a stop before I get to wherever I am going. Neat trick that.

This morning on my way into work, I noticed that I wasn't getting yelled at as often. Wow, did this thing learn my

pattern overnight? Then I noticed it wasn't telling me when the turns were coming up. The only thing I heard from it, was "re-calculating" every time I deviated from its intended route. The route would show up mapped, but I would only "hear" about it when I made at least a 90 degree turn from the intended route. Something strange was happening.

Then I noticed something odd. My little blue truck on the screen was not driving on the mapped road. In fact, it looked to be about 0.2 miles off the road. If the GPS was correct, I was driving through fields, houses, trees and over creeks (all at 55 or so). No wonder it didn't talk much, it didn't really know where I was.

Apparently, I'm having some trouble getting satellite reception. This is the second time this happened in a week. I can't find any news articles on GPS disruptions, so it may just be a local thing. I wonder....

Talking maps

After the wonderful drive back from Florida, I went out and purchased a GPS system. My good friends take theirs with them everywhere they go (just about) and use it to find hotels, restaurants, and other fun places. Further adventures with "Jill" can be found [here](#). I haven't used mine long enough yet for the voice to be accepted, but right now she is called Samantha. That's the name the voice came with, but I do find it slightly annoying (the voice, not the name).

My daughter and son-in-law (one of three pairs, take your guess), took me to a place called [The Blarney](#). It was a great little place. I'm not sure how authentic it keeps to real pubs in Ireland, but it was a fun time. I had hoped my talking map

would get me there, but we didn't have the address, and it wasn't in the restaurant list, we made our best guess. Lucky for us there was no ball game, the Blarney is just a short walk away from the Mudhens stadium. This is going to be on my list of places to go. I'm not a bar scene person but this was a lot of fun. The Bangers and Mash was fantastic. I have to add this place to my talking map.

I'm hoping I can find some downloads for places like this on the GPS site. I'm wondering now if there are other Irish or English pubs in the area. Or maybe a coffee shop or two? Other places I may want to see. Who knows.

The funny thing is, I picked the GPS up because I wanted to make a side trip on my way back from Florida. I didn't have a map, and I didn't use Google Maps or Mapquest to plan my trip back. By the time I got an Atlas, I was passed any good way of getting to where I wanted to be. That may have been a blessing, since my truck battery decided to give out, but that was the cause of me getting more tech stuff. Really, it wasn't because I wanted another toy. I'm a very good map reader, and I like plotting my own course. I've tested the GPS already and it mapped the same travel routes that I did. So do I think like a computer? You don't have to answer that one.

So be on the lookout for more adventures with my talking map. I hope I don't get sent directions to turn into a lake... ☐

Happy Mother's Day!

Another weekend has come and gone – and quickly too, it was a busy one! And this post title is already outdated because I've been so busy I haven't had a chance to write until 2 days after Mother's Day!

Friday night saw me doing some volunteer work for a local theater board. It wasn't really work; basically it consisted of me making sure the audition process for our summer show (Joseph – my favorite!) was flowing smoothly. It was fun, though I'd be lying if I didn't express my concerns about my hubby giving his audition his best shot. More about THAT later, based upon whether he makes the show or not...

Saturday was my daughter's 5th birthday party. As usual, none of the 18 kids from her class called to RSVP, but I was tired of worrying about it – been there, done that, ever since our oldest started inviting friends to *her* birthday parties. I don't know why parents can't figure out how to RSVP. The day before the party, when we hadn't heard from anyone, I did make sure we called one friend of the birthday girl's who always attends her classmates' birthday parties, and luckily she showed up. We allowed our older daughter to invite one of her friends, just so we could be sure we'd have at least some kids joining the lame birthday party crowd of Mom, Dad, Grandma, and Uncle Bud. Thank goodness we did that, otherwise my daughter would have had NONE of her own friends show up at her own birthday party! Luckily, she was fixated on the slumber party that would take place at Grandma's hotel later that night, so she didn't really seem to mind the one-kid turnout. Of course, the one kid that could come was a very high-maintenance kid, and she also had an accident minutes after arriving at our house. AND, in order for her to be able to come at all, she had to be dropped off at noon – 3 hours before the party was to start! But like I said, it was all worth it for our daughter to be able to have a friend at her party.

Saturday night my mom was very generous with her offer to take *all 4 kids* in her hotel room! Hubby and I ran like the wind, seizing an opportunity to go to a drive-in movie theater kid-less, even though neither of the movies sounded very intriguing. But we had never been to a drive-in together, and

we found a place 45 minutes away. It was so cool; it was out in the country; basically a farm that people converted into a drive-in. A very far cry from the crowded drive-in I used to visit as a teenager in a suburb called West Chicago – not a very good area now, and even back then, there was always a squad car patrolling inside. Not the case here – we were in the middle of the country, and this place even had a little snack truck and games you could rent for free while waiting for the movie to start (cornhole – a regional favorite and some mini-golf holes). The movies – Wolverine and 12 Rounds – were not very thrilling, and the peaceful night air and late hour did us in and we both fell asleep. Well, it had been huge day and they can't even start the first movie until almost 9:30 when it gets dark enough, so no wonder. And, Jill the GPS routed us into some construction on the way back so it took us an hour to get home at 1:30 in the morning! Construction in the pitch black middle of nowhere late at night when you're SO tired can be very disorienting! We didn't have any kids all night thanks to my mom, but we had to get up early the next morning to get breakfast before church so by Sunday night, we were dragging! I should have really taken a nap, but I was having such a great Mother's Day...

We went out to breakfast Sunday morning, and then my mom and uncle stayed to check out our church. It was a lot of fun for the kids to show them around, and I loved Sunday's message about motherhood. It was punctuated by a few wonderful videos, and the pastor took a break from our 'Fearless' series to focus on mothers and our special day – I really enjoyed it. Especially the surprise Willie Nelson song they played at the beginning of service! The pastor made sure to mention how difficult Mother's Day must be for those who have lost children or for those who can't have children, and I couldn't help but wonder about the people whose mothers have passed on – must be an extremely difficult day for them too. I have a few friends in that position; including one who lost her mother not more than a few months ago. So as much as I

was enjoying my Mother's Day, my thoughts and prayers were also with those who didn't find the day a cause for celebration. Here's hoping you had a great Mother's Day in 2009 with many more to come!

...And Back Again

(continued from the previous post – To Hellinois...)

So FINALLY, after yet another GPS debacle orchestrated by Jill (might be time to change the persona of the GPS again and fire Jill!) we arrived in Aurora, and it's the first time I've seen my parents' dogs in years. Loopy is looking a little bit gray in the muzzle, but also much slimmer since last time I saw her. And Happy... well, Happy is herself, I guess – hyper and happy to see my kids, I wouldn't expect any less! We visited with my mom for a little while, and then it was off to lunch, which my husband and I had carefully orchestrated. My mom was nice enough to watch our girls so that we could enjoy a little time out with just the baby, and after all that driving + the morning's (more than) two hour tantrum, boy, did we need some time to ourselves! So we went to Sweet Tomatoes – a restaurant that specializes in an ultra-fresh salad buffet, my husband's favorite, and I don't think he was disappointed! They also have 6 kinds of soup and 3 kinds fresh hand-tossed pasta – YUM! We drove around for a few minutes after lunch searching for a dollar store or two – next to zoos and cuisine, “exotic” dollar stores are my favorite things to see while in different areas, but we couldn't find one, so we went to a Petland instead. So I put aside my opinions that Petland is a leading trader in puppy mill pups, and we went for a visit. And this Petland had LOTS of animals with very nice habitats. They did have a huge bunch of puppies though,

and almost all of their “getting to know you” puppy rooms were taken (let me just vent real quick by saying – why can’t more people consider shelter dogs so we can reduce the amount of homeless pets in the country!!!) And I asked the staff members a few questions – some to learn things but most to test their knowledge on subjects – and they passed. They no longer sell seahorses because they require ultra-clean water and exceptionally large tanks. I was glad to see that Petland was no longer putting the lives of seahorses in jeopardy just to make a quick buck, but they lost me when they offered to order me some – oh well. There were the cutest little Robinsky hamsters – about the size of a silver dollar – and they were in constant motion. They are so fast that they kept flipping each other over in the hamster wheel and making each other go upside down! They were adorable, but how anyone could handle having such a busy pet is beyond me – you couldn’t even pick them up since they were so fast! Here is a picture of someone who actually got one of these things in their hand:



So then it was on to my nephew’s first birthday party – he is only $2\frac{1}{2}$ months older than my son, and the two of them together were SO cute! My son is on the left, birthday boy on the right:



The party was lots of fun, and it was nice getting to spend time with my family and my sister's in-laws, who we don't see very often. We had to leave a little bit early to try to get on the road at a decent hour, but before we left, my kids did a good job of trashing my sister's house. One of them clogged the toilet, one of them crumbled their birthday cake all over the floor (requiring my brother-in-law to haul out his Shop-Vac!), and one of them had too much cake and ice cream and spit up all over Grandma and the floor. I bet they're glad we don't come over very often! Just kidding, I'm sure it was understood that with 8 kids at one party, something was bound to get messed up – but why did all the messes have to be traced back to *my* kids?

After the party, I dropped my husband off at a Walgreens for some clearance shopping – his favorite! – cuz I wanted to stop by [White Castle](#) and get a case of slyders to bring home. White Castle is an institution in Chicagoland, and one of the things I miss that we don't have here. For those of you who aren't familiar, slyders are what locals call the little hamburgers that White Castle sells – the secret to the awesome flavor is steamed onions. My hubby must love me a lot to put up with the smell of steamed onions for the 4 hour drive home! And no, the frozen ones they sell at Walmart are not the same as the ones you can buy at the restaurants – which is why I try to bring home a case every time I go! But on Sunday, I kept getting behind slow drivers (what happened to

the drivers in Illinois? I swear, during this trip **I** was the most aggressive driver I ran into, what's happened to all the a**holes that used to be on the road over there? Could it be the red-light cameras?), and then they took forever at White Castle. And what do I do? I drive off with only my drinks, forgetting my cheeseburgers. So I get back in line, and of course I'm behind the slowest lady in the world – I was in line for 20 minutes, just to get food I had forgotten! By the time I got back to Walgreens, my husband was ready to put out an APB on our van. And of course the baby cried the whole time because he was tired and wanted his bottle, and I couldn't reach the spot in the car where he had thrown it. So I was flustered by the time we finally started for home. Luckily for me, we achieved a quadruple pass out though, so the drive home was peaceful. We got home around 1 am, and much to our surprise, our pet sitter and great friend Carol was still in our house! The kids started to wake up, so we rudely hushed Carol and brought the crying kids upstairs. Luckily we only had one straggler who stayed up for a little while, and I apologized to Carol for my rudeness (and my stench of coming off a 4-hour drive sitting next to steamed onions with baby spit-up on me). We were more than happy to share the White Castle bounty, and my husband drove poor Carol home since her car had died and she was trapped at our house – I felt badly getting in so late! I was so tired that I forgot to call my mom to tell her we made it safely – I don't think that's ever happened, oops!

Sunday we somehow got up for church, and we got to see some people get baptized which was a neat experience. The sermon was about Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, which interested me because I don't have much religious background and didn't know the story. But I learned some useful tools that I think might help me during this ultra-trying time that Samantha has been putting us through lately. After church, they had a program they call KidStuff – they have it twice a year – and Sunday's KidStuff was about obedience – perfect!

Just the message we need to drill into our kids' heads lately! It was a really cute skit about how it's important to be obedient, and I thought it was very well done. There was lots of physical comedy for the kids, goofy characters, an air horn (kids love noisy things!), and they stressed the importance of obedience repeatedly. And, they gave us an orange "O" to put on our fridge to remind the kids about being obedient! I was so excited to get home and apply these lessons to real life! But alas, after the pizza lunch at church for KidStuff, Sammie had to rub it in how much she DIDN'T learn from the skit – our friend is a professional photographer and met us at the park to get some Spring pics of the kids. But our family picture is minus one – Sammie refused to participate in the picture taking. Even seeing a robin's nest up close didn't soften her enough to be cooperative. So all my hopes about her learning something, even a little bit, from the obedience skit flew out the window. But the baby robin was adorable – there were two eggs and one that had hatched, couldn't have been more than a day old. I've never seen one so little, it barely had any feathers or baby bird peach fuzz! Awww!

Overall, a great weekend. I call it Hellinois, but I'm (half) joking. You couldn't pay me to live there, but there are worse places we could have to visit! I think we might be going back sometime soon for a very exciting, awesomely fun event – more on that later!!!

To Hellinois...

I'm not a big fan of the place and try to avoid it like the plague for the most part, but there are about two times a year I am willing to travel to the place of my birth which I

lovingly refer to as "Hellinois", a nickname for Chicagoland, with its insane traffic patterns and millions of unfriendly citizens: around April for my nephews' birthdays and also around Christmastime. Making the 4-hour trek across two states twice a year is doable and definitely worth it so that my kids can have fun and get to know their relatives. So Friday afternoon, we took off and headed over to the Land of Lincoln. I don't understand why it took me two hours to pack our family of 6 for a one day trip, especially because there were plenty of things that were forgotten, but more on that later. We arrived outside the Loop right about 6:30 on a Friday evening local time, but much to our surprise, we barely hit any backup. What the? Unheard of for a Friday night! But on our way past the Chicago skyline, we did have fun trying to find the new Trump Tower and comparing it to the John Hancock and also to the other new skyscrapers that have sprung up, seemingly over night. I have to admit that Chicago's skyline is more impressive than that of New York, at least in my opinion – just for the heck of it, I played tourist and actually took a picture of the Sears Tower. While I was there, I heard that they're going to build balconies on the observation deck of the Sears Tower with glass floors. They got the idea after watching all the tourists bump their foreheads on the windows while trying to look straight down. I have to admit, I've done that myself a few times. Wonder if I could keep my new-found vertigo in check enough to give the new balconies a try when they're complete?

We arrived at our hotel and got the kids ready to go down to the pool, and that's when we realized that we forgot my son's bathing suit, as well as ALL of my husband's clothes that had been put in the dryer before we left and forgotten. So we all had to sacrifice – I had to sleep in my clothes and give my pajamas (sweat pants and a t-shirt) to my husband to wear to the birthday party the following day. He had to wear pajamas to the party and also roast inside a sweatshirt all day since the t-shirt was ripped. My son went swimming in his pants –

luckily I had learned a little something from the New York trip and brought plenty of extra baby clothes with me.

We were only down at the pool for about 30 minutes, but the kids had fun – my son kept clapping. We had called fellow blogger Derek to join us, but we kicked him out soon after we got back from the pool since the room was very crowded and the kids needed to settle down for their big day ahead. We ordered pizza (MMMMmm, Chicago-style pizza!) and tried to get the kids to settle down, but it took a long time. We got so tired that we forgot to close the drapes, which led to everyone rising bright and early in the morning – big oops. Our almost 5-year-old Sammie, the handful (putting it mildly) of the bunch, decided to draw a bunch of block letter T's all over her cousins' birthday cards. No problem, until she ran out of room for any more T's and threw a 2-hour tantrum about it – I am not even exaggerating. By the time we checked out of the hotel, so many people had walked by glaring at our family; it was not a good way to start the day. We were so not in Kansas (err, Ohio) anymore. I have trouble getting used to that every time I visit other places. It feels weird to not say hi to everyone I pass, or worse yet, to say hi and get a weird stare in return.

We had decided that my husband was going to take Sammie somewhere else rather than for us to subject my elderly grandparents to her screaming, but luckily she calmed down on the way over to their house. We had a nice visit, and as usual, my grandma made too much food. What was supposed to be a light lunch (so we could fit in as many other samples of fine Chicago dining as possible during our short stay) turned out to be a buffet spread of strawberries, black raspberries, cheese, smokies in biscuits, deviled eggs, pickles, cheese spread and crackers, not to mention 3 kinds of dessert! So anyway, we had a really nice visit with my grandparents, although we were walking on eggshells with Sammie, who got an early birthday present from them, which was nice. But then

fights broke out over the birthday present, and rather than stress my grandparents, we beat a hasty retreat. My grandpa did manage to make a joke, despite all of his discomfort from the Parkinson's and who knows what else. He asked how our 10th Anniversary vow renewal ceremony went, and we said great! So then he said, "You made the same mistake twice, huh?" Obviously, I don't feel I made a mistake once (or twice) marrying my husband, but it was funny anyway and so great to see the old tease that is my grandpa back in action. So we left their house in Schaumburg and headed to Aurora to see the rest of the fam. After little sleep the night before and the 2 hour tantrum in the morning, I offered to drive so my husband could take some much needed rest. Wanting to think as little as possible, I turned on Jill the GPS and sat back and let her lead me through the tangle of expressways that is Chicagoland. Except that Jill had apparently had one too many morning cocktails. She directed me to stay on I-290 rather than to merge onto I-355. I knew better than that – I had made that trek many a time when my husband and I were dating. But my brain was fried, so I lemmingly went along with Jill's directions, and next thing I know, we're traveling east TOWARD the city, instead of west toward Aurora! Finally I saw the toll road we needed – I-88, and now we were finally headed in the right direction, after going 10 miles out of the way! Oh, well, at least we were running early since my kids had decided to get up at the crack of dawn!

Just writing about this makes me tired. I think I'll take a break here, unpack a little and save the rest of this huge weekend for another post!

New York Trip Diary Volume 5

NEW YORK TRIP – MARCH 20-23, 2009 – TAYLOR: 9 yrs, SAMMIE: 4 yrs, DISNEY: 2½ yrs, CHRISTOPHER: 8 mos

(continued from previous posts)

Monday, March 23 – We left the hotel for the Pittsburgh Zoo and promptly got lost. Many cities are situated on just one river, but some bank alongside 2 or 3 rivers, and that's where Pittsburgh lost me and we, in turn, got lost. Multiple rivers and all those hills – I have lots of trouble navigating my way through hills and mountains for some reason – probably because if you miss a turn, you can't just go a block and correct yourself because there's hills in the way. And Pittsburgh was also not lacking in what had become our nemesis (besides the ever-elusive Waterways bus) on this trip – construction zones. And we already talked about how Jill the GPS doesn't do detours. Lost as we were, we again got lucky and didn't wind up in any bad neighborhoods, but we did have to go without breakfast and almost without lunch. We stopped at a random police station for directions, and they were very nice (though they have some of the funkiest accents I've ever heard there in Pittsburgh – what IS that?), but the directions were very complicated, probably because of the rivers and hills to drive around, and we got lost again. Finally we found the zoo, and we picked up lunch at a little food stand on the river across from the zoo, and we refrained from making good on our threats to throw Jill the GPS in the river. Except now we were down to only getting to spend 2 hours at the zoo before they closed.

[The Pittsburgh Zoo](#) is nestled within some steep hills – like all the zoos we visited on this trip – and you had to take an elevator to get up the main hill and into the zoo. Once inside, we were very impressed. I'm having trouble deciding which zoo I like better between Pittsburgh and Akron –

Cleveland is not even on the same level as the other two. Pittsburgh has a thriving elephant herd – 2 calves born just weeks apart last July! Baby elephants are somewhat rare and difficult to come by in zoos – if a zoo can actually get elephants to breed (and I know the baby in Toledo was conceived via artificial insemination, so breeding might be somewhat difficult), they still have to wait through an extremely long gestation period (almost 2 years!) before seeing if they have a healthy calf. So the fact that Pittsburgh has 2 elephant calves that were born in the same month last year (also the same month as our baby boy!) is nothing short of amazing.

The Pittsburgh Zoo has an awesome aquarium with 3 types of penguin and a huge seahorse tank – next to manatees, seahorses are my favorite animal, and I have never before seen such a nice habitat for them or such huge seahorses! Also in the aquarium is an area where you can pet stingrays, and there's even a tunnel that runs underneath their pool that kids can crawl through and come up in the middle of the pool. Here is a picture of my daughter after she crawled through the tunnel:



And speaking of tunnels, Pittsburgh Zoo has a tunnel that goes *under* their polar bear pool! How cool is that? We didn't actually see it because we were there near closing time, and the bears were pacing by the door to go in for the night – we knew they wouldn't be swimming any more that day, so we skipped the tunnel. But I must go back some day to see that,

and also to spend more time in this awesome zoo – ok, I guess I just decided that I like Pittsburgh just a little bit more than Akron, but it was a tough call! Too bad Pittsburgh is almost 5 hours away, or I'd return in a heartbeat! And I forgot to mention how many fun things they have to kids to do, even beyond seeing the animals. They had a totally awesome looking playground, but we didn't go on that one because we weren't sure we'd have enough time. When we got to the end of the zoo, there was another playground, so we let them play on that until closing time. Our 2-year-old got "stuck" at the top of the playground – she was too scared to go down the slide and refused to come back out through the tunnels. I was worried that we'd get locked in the zoo like a couple of college kids I read about in Jack Hanna's hilarious book, *My Wild Life* – they got locked in the dark reptile house, where they could hear things splashing around all night! After we got my daughter to come down off the playground (thanks to her big sister who lured her away), the sea lions were putting on a little show right in the front of the underwater viewing window – which reminds me, we had also gotten to see an impromptu sea lion show earlier in the day – the zookeepers were training them and rewarding them with fish, it was really cool to watch!

On the way home, we stopped in Elyria, Ohio for dinner at a Golden Corral (always delicious) where my husband was a victim of racial discrimination by the steak griller, and we found what must be the last non-Super Walmart left in the world. Trying to save room in the car, we had neglected to pack enough diapers for our two children who still wear them, and we had to break into the new packs of diapers right there in the Walmart to change a double poopie from the baby and his big sister! It was interesting to be in a Walmart without groceries where the employees were actually preparing to close the store for the night – almost like time travel, but if I traveled in time, the last place I'd go is Walmart!

So anyway, now we had only 2 hours left of the drive home, and it passed uneventfully – the kids slept. We got home sweet home at about midnight, and the kids were really excited to see their pets and their room – they had trouble getting back to sleep. The pets were happy to see us, and my thanks goes to our great friend Carol who kept the pets healthy and happy during our absence. I was really surprised to see how big the rats got in just a few days though, Carol, what did you feed them?!? ☐

So, I had an amazing adventure with wonderful people. And this is the end of my diary. Well, not really, I will have one more entry to go back to the World Trade Center site visit, but I'm waiting for the right time to blog about that – it was a very moving experience. So thanks for reading, and I hope you had fun and maybe even learned a little something about places you may or may not want to visit some day!

There And Back Again

After leaving the NJ/NYC area, we decided to break the drive home in half and spend another few hours of fun at the Pittsburgh Zoo. After arriving at our hotel at 2.30AM (or was it 3.30? “Jill” the obviously feminine GPS was an hour slow), I got a few hours of sleep. The trek to the zoo AGAIN was met with detours and misdirection. We stopped at a police station and parked in a towing spot. Thank goodness Chris & Lisa returned to the van before we were given notice. Once again, Chris seemed to ignore Jill's directions to get us to the zoo. We stopped at a road side dairy treat where they had the largest and HOTTEST fish sandwich ever. It was so hot that I had to let it cool a few minutes, but it was good.

The Pittsburgh Zoo was in my opinion the best of the three. The exhibits were all extraordinary and entertaining. The African elephants were a special treat especially seeing the babies. A keeper was in the area with the 4 or five elephants and looked right at home.

The aquarium featured more jellyfish (I think Akron's jelly exhibit was better), HUGE (relative) pot-bellied seahorses, and penguins. My favorite exhibit was the sea lions on display. The trainers made them perform for their food and it was amazing to see the animals wave, leap out of the water, bark, and perform other eye-catching feats.

There was also a mole-rat tunnel area for the little ones to play in. Taylor and Sammie made a new friend inside the maze of tunnels. Little Disney was more apprehensive about starting off but once she did, it took some time to get her out. The park was closed by the time we got her out. But we had to stop by the sea lions one last time.

Then, it was back on the road for the final leg of the journey. We stopped in Elyria for dinner and stopped at Wal-Mart (**there is no escaping it!!!!**). Funny thing, this Wal-Mart was still a regular store. I had thought that all the old stores were becoming Super Centers... bigger and better, right? Well...

We returned from our trip around 12:00 Tuesday morning. Once again, I had an absolutely fabulous time in my role of Manny. Thank you Chris and Lisa for having me. Thank you Taylor, Sammie, Disney, and little Beeber. I was so proud of the four of you. There were a few moments when most kids would have been pulling their hair out, but you were all wonderful. The end of this fantastic voyage. Much too quick but memories to last a lifetime. Be sure to check out [taylhis'](#) blog for her own journal of the trip. I found that I had to make one adjustment to my own. HEHE

New York Trip Diary Volume 2

NEW YORK TRIP – MARCH 20-23, 2009 – TAYLOR: 9 yrs, SAMMIE: 4 yrs, DISNEY: 2½ yrs, CHRISTOPHER: 8 mos

(continued from a previous post)

Friday March 20 (cont'd) – We arrived at the Akron Zoo about 2pm, which was right on schedule pretty much, although it would have been nice to have more time to explore the wonderful zoo that awaited us. From what I saw, Akron looked like a dumpy little city with a beautiful little zoo. All of the exhibits seemed to be of newer construction, and the animals seemed really active and happy. The Akron Zoo has many unique animals in their collection; including the super rare Sumatran Tiger, (most people are used to seeing Bengals, also called Siberian tigers as those are the ones frequently exhibited at zoos) and the Sumatran tiger was roaring when we saw him. They also have 2 types of animals that I was looking forward to seeing – the hyacinth macaw and the capybara (largest rodent on earth) – but both species were off exhibit waiting for warmer weather. No problem, we had seen capybaras at the Cleveland Zoo earlier in the day, and I have a macaw at home, not a rare hyacinth, but a macaw just the same. Akron has a Malayan sun bear, the type of bear that was the inspiration to A. A. Milne for his Winnie the Pooh stories, and these are also not commonly on exhibit in zoos. When we stopped for lunch, we were pleased to find that the cafe is attached to a building with a Galapagos tortoise habitat, a komodo dragon exhibit, a really cool marmoset environment (a little marmoset – it's a small primate, if you don't know – came running up to the glass when he saw us with our nacho container and started licking the glass!), and an awesome jellyfish exhibit. Before Friday I had only seen one type of

jellyfish – moon jellies – but the Akron Zoo has several different kinds on display. My favorite were the bulbous blue blubber jellies. Here is the marmoset trying to taste our nachos through the glass while my daughter is in the middle of a blink:



And next is a picture of the komodo dragon; I couldn't resist posting it. These things are incredibly ferocious and huge. Once they claw (and *look* at those claws!) or bite their prey (and I'm talking prey as large as water buffalo), they hang around until the animal succumbs to the 28 varieties of deadly bacteria the komodo has in its saliva and then devour it. [Sharon Stone and her husband Phil Bronstein have something to say](#) about the danger of komodos after one bit off his toes during a behind the scenes visit. You can't really tell from the picture, but this thing was almost 10 feet long!



The Akron Zoo is a place for great family fun. The girls got

to be penguins:



and measure their wing spans:



Even though their baby brother didn't quite make it long enough to see all of the animals and activities Akron had to offer:



Another cool experience we had at Akron was hearing the bald eagles chirping. I always kind of assumed they would have big voices to match their size, but their tweeting was really cute! Overall, we had a wonderful day zoo-hopping. After our visit to Akron, it was time to head for our hotel in New Jersey. The ride was uneventful; the kids got some sleep and so did I. The traffic in New Jersey was absolutely horrible, which we totally expected, but what we didn't expect was all the detours. There were police and road construction everywhere, which amounted to a ton of traffic, especially for one in the morning. It was a bit stressful, but we did it, and kudos to my wonderful husband who kept his cool and guided us through the many detours for which Jill the GPS couldn't compensate. But who needs Jill? We made it without getting lost! And as we were walking down the hall to room 913 to turn in for the evening, I turned to Jamy our great friend and traveling Manny (man who's a nanny in case you missed my first diary installment) and said, "At least we're not staying in room 911 for our trip to New York." He showed me his key, which did say 911 – oops. Thankfully it was just a coincidence, not an omen:



And here is a parting shot of our family outside the Akron Zoo from earlier in the day – stayed tuned for Trip Diary Volume 3!



Crazy Busy

In the past few days, I've been able to catch up a little, but I haven't written much before today and yesterday because we have been too busy having fun!

It started last Friday when we took the kids out to the [Fun Spot](#) in Angola Indiana. We had a great time, but I think I learned a lesson about taking 3 kids out for a full day of fun in the sun while I'm trying to nurse a full-term pregnancy.

It was over 80°, and we ran out of water and I got sick. I think what pushed me over the edge was trying to watch my 20-month-old as she sat at the edge of a pool while my other children and husband went on the water slide. It's hard to explain to someone who doesn't know, but being this hugely pregnant is basically like being incapacitated – if my toddler had fallen into the water, it would have taken me way too long to get over to her. There was a lifeguard present, but still I was a nervous wreck and the stress of the situation was too much, so I picked her up and took her away from the pool. This of course made her cry, and so the exhaustion came from trying to redirect her and do something else in the heat... it was all just too much for me when all I wanted was a seat in the air conditioned arcade. And for his part, my husband only got to go down the waterslide once which also made me feel badly because he had so much fun, but I just couldn't handle our toddler any longer in the heat alone.

After the water slide fiasco, we made our way to the animal area – they have a macaw parrot and a few baby deer and some big cats. They are rescue cats; lions and tigers and a cougar, and I'm not sure where they were rescued from. I was a little disenchanted with how small the animals' enclosures were, but since they are large cats and spend roughly 20 hours a day sleeping, I think it's a good thing that they've been rescued at all and get food and shelter every day.

Then it was time for more rides, and this place is built for kids my daughters' ages! They have about 10 kiddie rides which all 3 of them could ride, and my 8-year-old still really enjoys these since she's not ready for big rides yet. Her little sister, on the other hand, cannot wait until she is a little taller and gets to ride the 4 roller coasters the Fun Spot also has. Then they have several middle-of-the-road rides for everyone, like flying boats, a scrambler, a tilt-a-whirl, and even more I'm not mentioning. Compared to the carnival that just left our town, admission into the Fun Spot

is a steal – it was \$4 for me, a non-rider who just wanted to visit the zoo. Our little toddler cost only \$4, and she was able to ride about 10 rides. Our 4-year-old was \$8, and my husband and our oldest were \$16 each. So for a grand total of \$48, it was a full day of family fun and much cheaper than the traveling carnival or even the county fair, based on what you get for your money. And I have to add that in June – too bad it's over now – but in June they had a special promotion where if you bring in a report card with A's and B's on it, the kid that earned them gets in free! So subtract \$16 from our \$48, and our day of fun was only \$32 – we were really pleased. The only problem with the place is that they are at the mercy of the weather always, and with all the rain and storms we've been getting, our day of fun was no exception and was cut short when a sudden storm moved in. But it was only an hour and a half away from closing anyway. Also, we had been about to leave as it was, and the staff handed out half-price admission coupons, so we will definitely be back when I can enjoy some of the rides myself after the baby is born. And I will be able to give hubby another few rounds on the water slide! We were so pleased with the place that we tried to go back Sunday since we wanted to take advantage of the report card promotion one more time before June was over, but alas, the weather foiled our plans and we ended up at [Crazy Pinz](#) in Fort Wayne, Indiana instead. Still a fun day, but no where near the value of Fun Spot. Crazy Pinz is an indoor entertainment place, and they have an arcade, mini-golf, bowling, and a 3-story play area for the kids. We've been there before and really liked it, but this time, everything had changed and was MUCH more expensive. But, we had 4 little kids (brought a friend along) who really thought we were doing something really fun that day, so what could we do but spend the day at Crazy Pinz regardless. I have to mention that somehow, on the way to Fun Spot on Sunday, my husband and I got to talking I guess and somehow missed the exit and overshot the place by about 20 miles. (Sorry for not using you, Mr. GPS, I thought I knew where we were going!) Then Fun

Spot was closed for rain, so we had to head down to Fort Wayne, and overall we ended up spending an extra \$20-30 on gas... Kind of a big oopsie with gas prices being so high in this day and age. It was a bad luck kind of day, but we did end up salvaging it, and overall, it was an AWESOME weekend.

Saturday we went with friends to see the movie [Wall-E](#) and then visited a friend who is recovering from heart surgery. He is doing well thankfully, and we all enjoyed our visit together – even the kids, who played with cats and bugs and other creatures found around their house in the country. We ran up to their church which was having an ice cream social and enjoyed delicious food and homeade ice cream – a dream for a pregnant lady – YUM! Wall-E was pretty good and as it turns out, the Pixar people had a brainstorming meeting years ago, and this is the last film to be made from ideas presented at that meeting. Others are [A Bug's Life](#), [Monster's Inc.](#), and [Finding Nemo](#), so needless to say, that brainstorming lunch should go down in history! I have to say I was a little taken aback by the lack of human dialogue in Wall-E. Even after seeing the previews, I wasn't prepared for it. I think this is what may have finished off my 4-year-old since she had to leave the movie theater with dad before the movie was even half over. She's been able to make it through the last 5-10 movies we've been to in a theater, so that's why I think it was the lack of dialogue in this one that did her in. It was a cute movie though, but not on par with Pixar's latest features like Monsters Inc. or especially Finding Nemo, at least in my opinion. Then again, it was SO different, mostly because it was so futuristic that I suppose it's hard to compare to the others.

So yeah, fun extended weekend, even though piles of laundry await my folding. If you're anywhere nearby, head out to Angola, Indiana and visit the Fun Spot, it's well worth it especially if you have really little ones – it totally trumps a place like Six Flags with their high admission prices and

long lines.