

July 2011 (part 1)

The July 2011 page on my calendar has been filled since spring, so I knew we had a busy month ahead. Organizing everything I had jammed into those little squares on the calendar was going to be challenging enough, but then we were even able to add a few family mini-vacations to the mix! It's been a great summer so far despite the challenges of sometimes trying to be in 2 places at once, and I wanted to chronicle everything to enhance the wonderful memories we made as a family this summer – but be prepared; this will be quite the manifest when I'm finished!

June 30 and July 1 – We began the month with a last-minute trip to an indoor water park that's an hour away. After a sudden burst of cabin fever, my husband found a super internet deal that afforded us some much-loved family time. The kids loved the indoor water park, and Christopher was old enough this time to go on some water slides which he found to be a blast!

Best of all, the constant lower back pain that had been making me short of patience, irritable and tired all the time seemed to be remedied by my getting to sit in water for 2 days. I should note for future reference also how interesting it was to pack different people for 3 different trips at the same time. Simultaneously, I was packing 6 people for an overnight stay (with a separate bag for changing into street clothes from bathing suits, I might add), 1 little girl for a 4 day stay at camp, and also for a 3 day trip for 6 people. It felt hectic at the time, but not unmanageable – due to the fact that my wonderful family did much of the work for and with me. And you know what? I don't think we forgot anything!!

July 2, 3 – After the water park, we got a day of rest (and unpacking, re-packing, laundry) before we set out Sunday for the 4-hour drive to Nashville Indiana – with one small glitch: Hubby had food poisoning. He had to miss church to rejuvenate, and then we were off – well, after packing up the car and some other in-town odds n ends.

July 3-6 – We spent the 4th of July in Nashville – a yearly trip Hubby and I take with our 4 kids, my parents, my uncle, and my sister, her husband and their 2 kids – there were 13 of us staying in a large house in the middle of the Brown County woods. It was a beautiful place, and we're torn on where to choose to have next year's gathering. Last year, we had a beautiful house where each family had their own bedroom and bathroom. The few downsides to this house (called The Oaks) was the large steep hill that led down to the pond and fire pit – it proved to be dangerous last year when someone took a nasty spill (but was uninjured), so we didn't want to gamble with it this year when we have an adult who is practically incapacitated (me being 5.5 mos. pregnant). Also, the kids have to be watched constantly down by that pond, so it was a nice break for the adults this year to not have to worry about who was going to take them down there. Also, there wasn't really any yard for the kids to play in at The Oaks. There

was a swingset, but really only the two 3-year-old boys were of the age to enjoy a swing set this year, and that leaves 4 other kids with no yard to run around in. Both houses had pool tables inside and hot tubs outside (which became little swimming pools for the kids since we didn't want to turn on the heat in 90° weather), and The Oaks had tons of dvds, board games, and a foosball table, but then again, this year we brought our own dvds and games and the kids had TONS to do and were never bored. Another plus to this year's cabin vs. The Oaks: the large dining room table that fit almost everyone at the same time so we could enjoy meals together. The Oaks had only a small breakfast nook that seated 4 people or about 6 kids, so the adults had to eat elsewhere. Given these pros and cons of each cabin, it's going to be a tough decision next year on where to stay!!

The kids' favorite thing to do this year was to go down to the creek that ran around the property (this cabin was called "Ginley's Gulch" for future reference). There they would walk the creek, hunting for crawdads, geodes, and minnows, and they found quite a few of all of the above. As I said, this property had a larger yard, and also 85 acres of forest, and in the future I would like to explore the gorgeous property more since I wasn't quite feeling up to that this year. I did enjoy walking down the cleared path into the forest though – there were many beautiful butterflies, cool looking insects, and birds to see and hear. And oh yeah! I forgot to mention another huge plus of Ginley's Gulch – the screened-in porch! It had a ceiling fan, so it was a wonderful, mosquito-free place to spend our Brown County evenings together. A great trip!!

July 6 – We arose at the crack of dawn to pack up the car and get the kids roused for the 4+ hour drive to Michigan to drop daughter #2 at camp. We were all exhausted, and the kids slept much of the way. We did stop in Fort Wayne for something to eat, and we finally tried a little cafe where we had always wanted to try their eggs benedict since reading an

ad for them years ago. The eggs benedict was a bust – sauce from a packet, don't you know, but they did have one of my seasonal favorites that's very hard to find in the northern part of the country where I live: fried green tomatoes. And they were yummy! We dropped Sammie off at camp just a little late, and we were excited for her after seeing what a great place [Camp Selah](#) is (Camp Selah is a Christian camp in Reading Michigan, and both of our kids who went had a SUPER time!)

July 7-9 – These next few days were a bit quiet without the whole brood together, and we fit in another family min-vacation: since Sammie had to be picked up in the morning in Michigan, we took the other 3 kids to the drive-in in Coldwater Michigan and spent the night there – lots of fun! Saturday the 9th we picked up Sammie, and she said she had a good week during her first ever time at camp.

July 11 was the 3rd birthday of a very special little guy, and we took him out to dinner at the local Mexican restaurant where they sang to him, put a sombrero on him, and dabbed his nose with dessert. I of course forgot my camera ☹ but he liked it all the same. It reminded me of last year when the staff at Bob Evans sang to him, and he dove into my shirt to hide – the year of experience helped him to enjoy the attention more this year. And in the morning of little dude's birthday, I had to drive Taylor to camp in one of the nastiest storms of the year. We made it there without a problem, but the ride home was dicey with driving rain and wind. I was glad I didn't have any kids with me which would have made me nervous, and as you can tell I made it just fine – even if I did arrive sopping wet and very late to Bible study. In the newspaper the next day, I saw a picture of a power line that fell into the road which turned out to be the same road I had been driving down during that storm. Just goes to show you what kinds of things to look out for when driving during inclement weather in the middle of desolate farm country, and I feel blessed to have made it safely.

July 11-14 – So with our eldest away at camp, the week flew by... even though we missed her (I especially missed having someone old enough to have a normal conversation with me during the day). We had 3 days of doctor appointments (me and our youngest-for-now had his 3-year-checkup) and meetings, and then... freedom!

July 15 – Hubby and I met my mom in South Bend, and she took “the littles” (our family name for the younger kids in our family; in this case it meant our 3-year-old, 4-year-old, and 7-year-olds) to Grandma’s for a vacation – which left Hubby and I kidless for a whole day! So Hubby took me to the Potawatomi Zoo in South Bend, and the amount of walking and the weather was perfect for me even while pregnant since it was just the two of us. What a great idea as I was just starting to get zoo withdrawl! After the zoo, we decided to take the scenic route home from South Bend and fell upon a perfect date purely by accident: in Middlebury Indiana, there is an excellent Amish-style restaurant called [Das Dutchman Essenhaus](#). We were driving by on a day when they had a buffet, so we could sample many varieties of their very delicious food. Even better, there were some Amish men offering carriage rides in the parking lot, so we took one! It was so romantic, the grounds of the mini-resort were beautiful, the weather was perfect, and hearing the history of the grounds as told by our Amish guide was wonderful – best date day ever!!

(below is a picture of a horse and buggy like the one we drove in (ours was more of a carriage than a buggy). I had to take the picture on the way home since I had forgotten my camera and couldn’t take any pictures while on the buggy ride!)



July 16 – This was the day we picked up our oldest from camp, and we got to hear every detail about her awesome week while driving from Michigan to Fort Wayne to see... the new Harry Potter movie ON IMAX IN 3D!! Yes, it was as cool as it sounds, and it was fun to take Taylor out for a fun day with only parents and no younger siblings – dinner was at Golden Corral, one of her favorite places since she loves steak. I'm thankful that the awful nausea I felt earlier in the day did not persist through the movie, and the cause of it that day still perplexes me... such is a mystery of pregnancy, I guess.

July 17-18 – The 3 of us tackled the huge project of cleaning out our spare room – what a mess! I wish we had taken some "before" pictures, but the most important thing is that it got done, even if I felt like I was going to fall over in exhaustion by the end of it. I'm so proud of Hubby for all the hard work he did for this project, and especially that it was his idea to tackle it earlier than we had scheduled – we began Saturday night after Fort Wayne rather than Sunday after church as we had planned. But it looks GREAT, and as I'm writing this at the end of July, our family has gotten so much use out of it already. We made it into a craft / hobby / school room, and it has a computer, Taylor's new sewing machine (a present from Grandma), all kinds of paper, crayons, glue, etc, and all the many, many arts and crafts kits and supplies we had been saving (and losing) for the past 5 years.

(July manifest to be continued – need to give your eyes a

break! But first, here is a pic of a creative, cute fire hydrant in downtown South Bend Indiana I snapped while sitting at a stoplight – look for it near the silver van's rear bumper)



Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 2

Sunday January 16 – We drove over to Congo River mini golf to try to feed the gators they have there, which never works out because it's usually too cold in January for the cold-blooded gators to care much about eating, and this time was no exception. But we spent a long time just watching the gators and their habitat-mate turtles climbing around and over each other, getting in and out of the water – kind of like a free little zoo exhibit. My kids are too little to enjoy or let us enjoy playing mini-golf, so we went to Sizzler for an all-you-can eat lunch buffet. We spent the afternoon relaxing at the house so Hubby could watch the Chicago Bears game and the kids could swim, and we even took a dip ourselves at half-time. For dinner, we went to Medieval Times, which is a dinner show – it is SO fun!!! Everyone is seated around an arena, and the

audience eats a Medieval-style feast while watching a show complete with horse, knights, and jousting. You are assigned a seat in a certain color section (we were green – note the crown in the picture below), and you cheer on your color knight in the jousting and games – it's a blast!!



After watching the knights duke it out, Grandma took the kids back to the house and we took Jamy on the extreme go-karts at Fun Spot. The track called The Vortex is wicked; you wind up and around 3 or 4 times until you reach the top, and it's strange to be up so high in a go-kart. But you don't really have time to think about that, because there is a steep drop down, followed by a couple of hairpin / bowl-like turns that you have to navigate as driver of the kart! Super fun, though not for everyone. We thought this is what caused Jamy's back injury that ended up plaguing his trip, but turns out it was something else. And we took our daughters on these go-karts later in the week – with helmets of course – and our oldest hated them and wouldn't let me use the accelerator; it was SO frustrating!! Our daredevil 6-year-old Sammie loved it though, and I found her to be a passenger more willing to go my speed – pedal to the metal!!

Monday January 17 – We ate breakfast at Sizzler at their breakfast buffet, and then headed out to Universal Studios as planned despite the dire forecast of rain all day, and the weathermen were not mistaken. It was like a monsoon when we arrived, and scarcely let up all day. Many of the rides at

Universal are indoor, but Hubby and I did take a bit of a gamble (and lost) when we got in line for the new Rip Ride Rockit coaster. They had to shut the ride down when they saw lightning, and wouldn't you know it, we were first in line! After investing that much time waiting, we really didn't want to get out of line, but the kids were waiting with Grandma and Jamy, so we called them to see if they were ok and able to stay dry. We waited probably about 20 minutes, and it was fun to try to read the different hand signals and procedures the staff was doing to see if we would get to ride soon or not. Finally, they opened the coaster, and we were first – test rats. This coaster looks more intimidating than it is, mostly because the first lift is straight up, face pointed at the sky, your back is parallel to the ground. Other than that, it's a pretty lame coaster; the best thing about it is that you get to choose a song to listen to while you're on it, and your song choice plays in the speakers behind your head. I chose "Devil Went Down to Georgia" which made a very good coaster theme song, but the coaster was so tame that I was able to do some air-fiddling along to the song. I heard Hubby beside me rocking out to Gloria Gaynor's I Will Survive, and that seemed like fun too, but I wasn't about to wait in line again for this ride. The other thing that stank about the Rip Rockit is the rain – riding a coaster in the rain is not a lot of fun. The rain pelts your face; it hurts and you can't see anything, so it takes a lot of the fun out of it. And oh yeah, this is how soggy we looked when we were done riding:



Most of us made the best of the

rain; after all, where we were from in Ohio the weather was sub-zero, so rainy 50's still felt good to us. Our oldest was not a happy camper, however, and she soon grew tired of walking around in the rain, even though Grandma splurged and bought the kids ponchos – I didn't think to bring any, but maybe I will next time. It never does the all-day-rain thing in Florida! It usually rains or storms for less than an hour and then the sun comes back out so we were unprepared for the all day down-pour. But seriously, how could Universal be anything but fun? Even though the rain slowed us down a bit, we were still able to catch our first glimpse of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter – it was very cool!!

Hogwarts castle was amazing, and I guess I must have misplaced the picture I made Hubby take of me in Hogsmeade, which was beautiful at night. We got some Butterbeer, and it was yummiier than the version we attempted at one of our game nights here in Ohio. The Wizarding World has 3 rides, and we only had time to get on The Forbidden Journey on this day – that's the one inside the castle. While you wait in line, there is plenty to see – it looks like you are on the movie set except better because it doesn't look like a set – it looks real! The portraits move and talk, and there are 3D projections of Harry, Ron, and Hermione that look like real people. As you wind around the corridors of the castle, you get to explore many scenes straight from the books and movies: Dumbledore's office, Gryffindor common room – even the Sorting Hat makes an appearance! And the ride itself is *amazing*!! If you are a Harry Potter fan, this area is a **must-see**!! Though we did have a slight oopsie – while trying to rush over to the Harry Potter World before the park closed, we skipped lunch, so now we were cold, wet, and hungry. It would have been ok, except that once we snaked throughout the corridors of the Hogwarts castle, we learned that the Forbidden Journey ride was down. After waiting in the dark hallway listening to the Sorting Hat give his spiel over and over and on empty stomachs, we had had it – especially grumpy oldest who, if you

remember, was not happy with the day at Universal in the rain to begin with. Our torturous wait in the hallway of Hogwarts became so irritating that I wished my husband had bought the flaming wallet we had seen at the magic show – so we could throw it at the Sorting Hat, flames and all! ☐

We did finally get on the ride, and it was awesome, but my oldest neglected to try it – she doesn't like anything faster or more thrilling than the Scrambler. As I said, the ride was amazing, so now we were all famished after a day at Universal. But being budget-conscious we wanted to leave the parks before finding dinner, though I must confess: I was so hungry that the idea of the 'whopper bar' on Universal's City Walk that had turned my stomach that very morning was actually sounding quite good after a day walking around in the rain! We ended up at Denny's, which is a place I hadn't been to in probably over a decade, and while the food wasn't great, it sufficed.

(to be continued in part 3)

Secrets Of Traveling With Kids

I'm smack dab in the middle (of the beginning) of raising 4 kids of all different (under 10) ages, and also their friends are around a lot, so we are constantly surrounded by young-ins! Of my many observations and trials and errors in trying to keep them all simultaneously calm and content, I have discovered a few secrets, *golden* secrets – so considered because of their miraculous success rates, at least in the

under 10 set. Give me a few years (especially when the kids reach their teens), and I may have enough golden kid-contenting secrets to write a book, let's hope I learn some more anyway...

1. If you trace the roots of every kid tantrum and meltdown, you will find that most are derived from feelings of hunger, followed closely by fatigue and thirst; the latter two can be interchanged, it depends upon the kid. But the #1 reason is usually hunger. Keeping small, energy-boosting (and likable!) snacks on hand at all times can do wonders for the mood of the group.

2. Never underestimate the power of blankie. I keep those really thin blankies in my car – the ones they give you at the hospital when you're having a baby. They fold up so small, it's really not a big deal for me to keep a bag with 4 of them (1 per kid is important!) folded up and stashed under the front passenger seat. When we are returning home on a long drive or even when we're in the middle of a long day out, a sleepy (and full-stomached, see hint #1) kid can often be comforted and most often put to sleep by a blankie. Even the thin ones work like a miracle; I've seen it work for multiple ages, genders, and personalities. It's difficult for me to get used to, but I keep offering my son little stuffed animals to play with. I had 3 girl babies before him, and they all loved stuffed animals. My son could care less, unless the stuffed animal still has its tag for him to rip off. But the blankie secret is effective even with him – he'll pull it up against his cheek and instantly get sleepy! If you don't have enough of the hospital blankies for each kid (and it's important they each have their own), I highly suggest you purchase other thin blankies for the car since they're inexpensive, especially when you consider how helpful they are. They come in packs of 4 or 5 for under \$10, I think... A key to helping this secret be effective is to make sure **you** retain control of the blankies – don't let the kids keep them

in the back of the van or like anything else, the novelty will wear off, rendering the blankie ineffective. My kids know that the car blankies are just for “blankie emergencies”, and that policy helps to make sure I can keep them somewhat clean and stashed and ready for use.

So just remember, snacks and blankies can usually get you out of most kid-pinches, sometimes even calming kids who pinch, ha. At the very least, if you find yourself in charge of some crazy kids, plan ahead and do some light packing – these hints will buy you some time to think of a better plan!

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!

