

Chapter 12. Sabbatical Leave Experiences

We rented our house in Edmonton to the Ivan Stonehocker family from Lacombe, bought an old utility trailer that would hold our luggage and our camping gear, and on 1 July started on our way to California. It was not the greatest start because the alternator warning light in the car was on and stayed on, but it was a holiday and we decided to hope for the best. Unfortunately, the best did not happen. When we stopped for gas in Kamloops the battery was dead and we were immobilized. A new alternator had to come from Vancouver, so we found a place to camp and to wait it out. The Kamloops area is supposed to be dry in the summer but for us it rained and rained and we all got wet and had to find a motel to dry out again. Things were not good for a few days, therefore, but the car did get repaired and we were on our way again. We had wonderful camping and hiking experiences in Olympic National Park and along the Oregon and California coast and we made our way to our temporary home in Davis without further difficulties.



Off to California July 1969

Four months earlier, on my way back from a weed science conference in Las Vegas, I had made a side trip to Davis to arrange rental of a house for our stay there. I met Stan Morrison, an agricultural engineer, who was going to Cambridge for a year, and we rented their house at 44 Walnut Lane, a satellite housing development just outside Davis itself, for seven months, from mid-July 1969 to mid-February 1970.

The Morrisons, unfortunately, had left us very few matching dishes but somehow we were able to make it work. It was predictably hot in July in the San Joaquin Valley and most things along the roads looked pretty brown. The house had central air-conditioning but it cost as much to run that as it cost to heat our house in Edmonton in mid-winter, so we usually would not turn on the AC until around noon. The house also came with three cats and with two chickens that actually laid eggs. There were peach, fig, and other trees in the large backyard that needed to be watered regularly, and the walnut tree later yielded a wheelbarrow full of delicious walnuts that impressed us no end.

For a while we also had a pet gerbil. It caused occasional grief when it was out of its cage and was very difficult to find and catch and get back in the cage. Once the beast actually chewed up part of a book! I cannot remember the gerbil's ultimate fate under our children's excellent care but I am quite sure it was no longer around when we left Davis in February.

We had not yet acquired a TV set back in Edmonton—we were holdouts—and our landlord did not provide one for us either. Almost immediately that became an issue when the first US-manned moon landing was about to happen. Fortunately, the neighbours across the road invited us to come to their house to watch that important event on 20 July 1969, with Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin as

the Apollo 11 crew. Several months later we did actually buy a small black-and-white TV set that eventually found its way to our Edmonton home.

Joan started grade 1 in a school nearby, on the edge of our subdivision, and she and Karen were picked up by a bus every day. Because the school was overcrowded, Mark and Ann had to ride a bus to another school, right in Davis. On Sundays we made our way to the small Christian Reformed Church in Sacramento, about 30 km away, most often twice. Sunday School or Bible class took place before the morning service, but we did not always go there. People who befriended us included pastor Earl Marlink and his wife Lenore, and Gene and Shirley Vanderwall. They and others helped make our stay in Davis pleasant. The Beukelman family from church operated a dairy farm west of Davis, and on a Sunday afternoon visit there we got to see how milk was produced in a sort-of milk factory by cows that never saw pasture with lush new grass.

With the help of Oliver Leonard and technician Keith Glenn I got started on some serious research, part of which consisted of exposing bean plants to radioactive carbon dioxide and examining the effect of different herbicides on such plants. The sky was predictably blue every day during the summer months and I could do much of the experimental work outside. We saw no rain until November, in fact, and then finally the roadside landscape began to turn green for the first time. The winter season also brought occasional serious fog, so much so that one Sunday morning on our way to church I suddenly saw through the passenger side window that we were going past a stop sign onto another road. That was enough to slow us down considerably for a while.

Much of the time I rode an old bike back and forth to the campus every day. One of those times, on the way home, I suddenly saw the beautiful snow-capped mountains of the Sierra Nevada to the east. That was the one day a north wind had blown away enough of the smoggy air that we hardly realized was there all the time.

I had occasion to go on a number of very informative field trips with people like Oliver Leonard, Clyde Elmore, and Harry Agamalion, and also with John Ahrens from Connecticut who was in Davis on leave just as I was. I saw huge strawberry and vegetable fields in the amazing Salinas Valley, vineyards and wineries in the Napa Valley, brush control experiments in the hills, and tree root problems in Sacramento storm sewer drains. I remember being told that new plantings of broccoli happen every month of the year in the Salinas Valley. Oliver Leonard scared me with his driving when we were following Harry Agamalion's truck down the busy freeway through San Francisco at 60 miles per hour and not more than about ten feet from his back bumper. But we arrived safely, and later I came home with freshly picked cauliflower from a valley field.

At Thanksgiving time in November, John and Sophie and their four children came to visit, from Boulder, Colorado, where they had moved some time earlier—from Houston. All twelve of us went to San Francisco for a day and planned to go out for dinner in Chinatown. Traffic being what it was, our two cars became separated at one point. We had very little hope of finding each other again because we had no contingency plan for such a situation and we had no agreed-upon destination. I had fully expected, therefore, that we would be going back to Davis our separate ways

when suddenly someone yelled, “There they are!” One of us made a U-turn and we actually were reconnected and able to find dinner somewhere.

Earlier, Mom Wierenga had come from Edmonton to visit us for a week or two. One day we took her down to Ripon to visit Gilbert Den Dulk, a local physician and almond orchard owner, and father of Andrew’s close friend Bob Den Dulk. A couple of our children managed to climb to the top of one of the small windmill towers that were used to stir the air if there was a serious risk of frost. Some other things that happened during our stay in Davis included the purchase of our first slide projector (we still have it and it still works), the construction of a fitted plywood cover for our utility trailer to take the place of the tarp, and the fact that we learned to like white wine. I also succeeded in taking a few pictures of the moon through our binoculars.

During the fall months I had ongoing correspondence with Fa-yan Chang, who was finishing his Ph.D. thesis, and at the end of October I flew to Edmonton for his thesis defense. He did well on the exam, and I was happy that he was successful. In some sense, of course, I was on trial as much as he was. At Davis, we got reacquainted with Bob and Roswita Norris. I knew Bob from his graduate student days in Edmonton several years earlier—he was now a faculty member at UC Davis.



Camping in Yosemite 1969

As a family, we made a number of day trips to such places as Muir Woods and to Carson City and Nevada City, of gold and silver mining fame, and we enjoyed a wonderful camping and hiking trip to the incredible Yosemite Valley. I had hoped to make a second trip to the valley during the winter but that never happened. Over New Year’s we had decided to go to Disneyland and San Diego, taking our tenting gear and our trusty utility trailer, of course. As it turned out, we could not find a

campground near the coast south of Los Angeles and we had to drive up into the foothills to find a place. Little did we know that it would get cold there during the night. We spent a miserable night, crowded on top of each other to try to stay warm, but it did not work well. There was a lot of ice on the water in our dishpan in the morning and we soon found a motel for the next night. Our several days at Disneyland were great, as was our visit to the San Diego Zoo—where Karen was the unhappy recipient of some bird’s defecation on her head.

On the way to San Diego, we decided to visit the Wilgenburg family who operated a large dairy farm near Escondido. Mrs. Wilgenburg was the widow of my father’s partner back in Holland in the early 1930s. We had a very nice visit there, including reminiscing about a time about which most of us knew very little. An embarrassing event took place when we left—near the end of the long driveway the horn on our car suddenly began to blast and would not stop! I was frantically yanking at the

wires when one of the Wilgenburg men drove up, thinking that we were in some kind of trouble and were calling for help.

There was a lot of student unrest and anti-Vietnam-war protest during the time we were in California, though less so on the Davis campus than, for example, on the UC Berkeley campus. Perhaps the closest thing at Davis was a sign for the *Society for the Prevention of Plastic Plants*. One day I took the university shuttle bus to Berkeley just to see what things were like there and I wandered about the campus part of the day. I don't recall ever seeing and hearing so many weird and sometimes scary-looking people in one place as on Telegraph Avenue in the center of that campus.

I accumulated a large pile of processed X-ray film sheets that showed the results of my experiments and I was able to use some of the material in my teaching in later years. Unfortunately, the results, exciting as they were at the time, never did get published in a scientific journal. Somehow, other things pushed that part into the background. I probably decided that I had to repeat some of the work to verify that my conclusions were correct, and that never happened. I did use some of the results in a research talk I presented at Oxford some months later but that was the extent of their public exposure. Then again, the results of my research at Oxford also were never published. Perhaps that is simply par for the course for short-term research projects in other people's labs.

An important question before leaving Davis was how we would meet our transportation needs during our stay in England that was next on the agenda. The question was answered when we visited a Volkswagen dealer in Davis and purchased a seven-passenger van, for delivery in London at the time of our arrival there and with the intent of shipping it to Canada at the end of our stay.

We planned to drive to Randolph, Wisconsin, via historic Route 66, park our car and trailer there, and fly from Chicago to London on 12 March. For the trip east we were able to arrange a free weekend stay in a mobile home park in California City—an 'investment' development in the semi-desert. We had to sit through a tour and a sale push but that seemed manageable. Oliver Leonard had some kind words for us at a farewell gathering and we packed up and headed out.

We made a couple of stops along the way, including Joshua Tree National Monument, lunch with Sy and Jan Westra in Chino, the Petrified Forest National Park, Rehoboth Christian School in New Mexico, and the Abraham Lincoln home in Springfield, Illinois. We had a supper visit with Wilco and Audrey in Madison, and soon reached the Fisher home in Randolph, where we met Mom Wierenga, aunt Albertje, and Peter. Mark and I flew from Milwaukee to Grand Rapids for a quick visit with the Steenstras. The next day we put our trailer in uncle Andrew's shed and Frank and Jeanette drove us to the airport in Chicago. We travelled as lightly as we could, with ten pieces of checked luggage and with a small red carry-on case emblazoned with a big yellow 'V' for each of the children.



Friendly cactus



Petrified Forest

The overnight BOAC flight to London left us sleepless and tired but we were able to make our way to the VW dealer to take delivery of our new van. The children slept on the floor at the dealership while we were waiting to get the paper work done. I had not driven in England before and had never driven a VW van, especially one with the steering wheel on the wrong side for England, so it was a bit awkward at first but we managed to find our way out of London to Oxford, about an hour and a half away, though it seemed to take us much longer at the time. My university host Chris McCready had rented a furnished house on our behalf, 'Watkins Close' in Hampton Poyle, a small village not far from Oxford. He had brought a box of groceries for us as well. The house came complete with cat, garden and gardener, a coal-fired stove in the kitchen for central heating, and a multi-page inventory of everything in the house. There had just been a snowstorm, and we were tired and cold when we arrived late Friday afternoon. Mrs. Gordon-Smith, the lady who looked after getting us into the house, had been waiting for our arrival for some time apparently and she did not seem particularly happy about our late arrival. We stoked the fire until we were comfortable and settled in for the night.

There was a message inviting me to a Saturday noon welcome tea at the department in Oxford so I had to get organized for that also. The most immediate problem with that was that I did not have an adapter plug for my electric razor, so I simply cut off the existing plug and poked the wires into an outlet. It worked. The day after, Sunday, we were invited to dinner at the McCreadys who also drove us around a bit and showed us where some things were and how things needed to be done. To open an account with Lloyd's Bank in Oxford, for example, I needed to have Chris McCready come along to 'introduce' me, something I was not accustomed to.

On Saturday afternoon we had driven around and looked for a church where we might worship the following day. The small Baptist Church in nearby Kidlington looked like a good possibility so that is where we went. We worshipped there regularly almost the entire time we were in England—not counting, of course, the two trips to the continent and a few weekend trips elsewhere. Rev. Ramsbottom—

interesting name—was the pastor, and Eric and Jean Cox, close neighbours in Hampton Poyle, also were members. Eric was assistant manager of our bank in Oxford, something that turned out to be important when we were about to return to Canada later in the summer. One of the more interesting experiences we had in church was an adult baptism by immersion. Margaret Houghton and her husband John and two children had come from an Anglican congregation where she had been baptized as a baby. After considerable soul searching she agreed to be baptized again, this time as an adult, in order to become a full member of the congregation. The ceremony functioned very much as a public profession of faith. She was dressed in a white robe, read some scripture while standing in the baptism tub, got dunked by the pastor, and then walked out to get dressed again. Our children came out of their Sunday School classes for the occasion and witnessed it from front row seats.

The weather stayed quite cool for the first month or so and we burned about a ton of coal during that time to keep the house warm. Perhaps we kept it warmer than the owners would. Ginger, our resident cat, liked to sit on top of the warm stove in the kitchen. As spring and summer came, we made a number of day trips to the scenic Cotswolds nearby, to Wales, to London, to the Whipsnade Zoo, to Shakespeare's home, to Bath, and to Stonehenge where we then could still walk right up to and around the huge stone pillars. We even drove 85 miles to Cambridge (it took two and a half hours) for a visit with the Morrisons, owners of the house we had rented in Davis. They were quite unhappy about the cold winter they had spent in a house with only portable electric heaters for warmth.



Karen at Stonehenge

The school in Kidlington was about to be on a break when we first arrived, but several weeks later we were able to arrange for our children to be enrolled there. I don't think they were thrilled about it, and perhaps the teachers were not so excited about it either but they accommodated us, even when we took them out of school again two weeks later for a ten-day trip to Holland. We did not really care if they learned anything in school during our stay but we were confident that they would benefit from the experience. Some of them quickly picked up a notable English accent that disappeared again very soon after we returned to Edmonton later in the summer. Joan was in a different building from the other three, and at noon the first day she was in a panic because she had no money for lunch. Dixie had given it to the teacher, probably without telling Joan. In any case, all went well and she did not have to starve.

At the end of April we made our first trip to Holland. From the ferry landing in Belgium we made our way to the Dutch border and surprised the officials there with the strange combination of a Canadian passport, a Dutch name, and a German license plate on our van. After an overnight stay in a hotel in Goes, visits to Keukenhof and Madurodam, and a bed-and-breakfast on the main square in Delft—on the Queen’s birthday, complete with a parade—we made our way to *oom* Jaap and *tante* Fo’s large house in Terschuur where we settled in for the next six days. We had written to them about the possibility earlier and *oom* Jaap had phoned to let us know that we could stay with them. Their daughter Reina and her husband Henk came over to help and translate as needed. My uncle and aunt had a large family but most of the children were grown up and away from home already. We used the house mainly as a place to sleep and eat and were mostly gone during the day. We visited the Nijboers at Dronkelaar, *tante* Eef and *oom* Lubbert in Nijkerk and, with Reina along, we went to Achterberg and to the large war cemetery at Groesbeek and the war museum at Overloon. A photo stop at the *School met de Bijbel* in Rhenen, my old elementary school, had to be included also, of course.

We covered a lot of territory and did a lot of touristy things in a short time, including a visit to the *Muiderslot* and the Alkmaar cheese market. Our relatives probably were quite happy to see the busy family disappear again. On the morning of Ascension Day we packed up and headed north to Groningen, where we met up with Dixie’s uncle Ben and some other relatives, stayed overnight, and eventually made our way to Hoek van Holland. We had decided to take the overnight ferry from there to Harwich, thinking that we might sleep on board for a while. The four-bunk cabin we had was small and very crowded for six people, however, and the night was short and not very comfortable. After we got off the ferry, we stopped for breakfast in Colchester and then it actually felt like we were coming home.



Family dinner in Watkins Close 1970

We had no TV in the house but we did have a radio. The children entertained themselves happily, however, and occasionally they put on a small performance for Dixie and me. There were things to do and places to go and the days when I was not working at the university filled easily. We walked the trail to Hampton Gay, did brass rubbing in the old church in Hampton Poyle, and took part in the church’s family walk one Saturday afternoon. The children would get eggs for us from a farmer nearby—when I tried to

have a conversation with him, I could understand only every third word or so. We had a letter from Jack and Avlyn in which Jack informed us that he had read a good part of our last letter to them to the council in First Church! So much for privacy.

I made a few professional visits, including a longer than expected train trip to the May and Baker headquarters in Ongar, northeast of London, a plane trip to Dublin

for a meeting of the Society for Experimental Biology, and a head-spinning one-day series of nine successive visits with scientists at the Weed Research Organization facility at Kidlington. I also had occasion, of course, to talk with the department head, ‘Professor’ Geoffrey Blackman, important original developer of uses for the herbicide 2,4-D. A sign in the department’s library read, “Professor has decreed that” Blackman allegedly said once, “I don’t read the literature, I write it.” No shortage of ego, obviously. I was quite content that I did not actually work for him and, therefore, did not owe him anything. There were a number of other fine scientists in the Department of Agriculture, including, for example, Daphne Osborne and John Sargent, with whom I frequently talked at coffee or tea time. A fringe benefit of being in the department was that I could buy Kodachrome slide film from the stock room much cheaper than elsewhere, so I stocked up.

On one of our weekend trips we picked up two female hitchhikers who turned out to be Dutch. Dixie and I debated for a while whether we should tell them that we could understand what they were saying, and finally decided that we should, to spare them potential embarrassment. I think they appreciated it.

Some time in late May we received word that George was coming to see us for a few days from Holland where he was visiting the Nijboer relatives. He planned to take the train from London to Oxford, where I would pick him up. It was almost certainly his first trip abroad and somehow he got on the wrong train out of London. He phoned us and said he was at the Reading station instead of at Oxford. Fortunately, that was no more than about an hour away from us so I drove there and picked him up. He stayed with us a few days, until we were ready to go on our planned 24-day camping trip through western Europe. He traveled with us to Holland, including one overnight tenting stop in Belgium, and we dropped him off at the Nijboers. It was quite late already (9 pm) and nearly dark when we arrived there, and we gave the aunts and uncles a bit of a start. They were just into their evening *pap* (porridge) when we got there, in preparation for bed.

Looking back at our travel dates now, it is a miracle that I got any research done at all during my time at Oxford. We returned from our first trip to Holland on 9 May, and a month later we left for our second and longer trip. The total time that our children were in school in England, therefore, was only about eight weeks, in three separate instalments. I don’t think they received any report cards for the time they spent there but we were not concerned about that.

In preparation for the camping trip we bought a large secondhand European-style tent. We rented a double air mattress (for Dixie and me) and a camp stove, along with a top carrier for our van, and we borrowed sleeping bags from our landlord. The tent was big and relatively light-weight but it had an elaborate pipe frame and was a complicated one to set up. That was fine for European campers who would stay in just one place for a couple of weeks but not so nice for people like us who would do quite a few one-night stands. But we decided it would work, and it did. In places where I had arranged to visit weed scientists, as well as in several other locations, we would stay at least two nights, so that helped. I visited with people at the Agricultural University in Wageningen right away; later I visited with people at the University of Hohenheim and at the Geigy Corporation in Basel.

Before we left Holland, we visited the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam, drove through several picturesque old towns, and in Amersfoort bought two typically Dutch paintings, to be sent to us in Edmonton. They are still on our walls. On Sunday morning I went—alone—to church in the *Gereformeerde Kerk* in Rhenen, where I recognized several people but did not stop to talk to anyone. We drove via Köln (Cologne), Worms, and Heidelberg, along the Rhine and the Neckar, stopping here and there until we reached Stuttgart where I went on my second ‘work’ visit at the University of Hohenheim. Next day it was on to München (Munich) for a visit to the Dachau concentration camp museum where I had the shivery experience of standing inside one of the gas chambers—I chose not to take our young children through there. We drove through the Austrian Alps with lots of hairpin turns, and then through tiny Liechtenstein into Switzerland. We saw beautiful scenery everywhere we went, especially in the Lauterbrunnen valley. I made a third work visit in Basel, and then we went on to Geneva and Lausanne and into France to complete our circle tour.



Lunch along the road in Europe



Dixie and Joan

Setting up the tent in the rain at one place in Germany was not much fun. It did not help any that the children really wanted to help me, and I chased them back into the van. They still remember that. Another time we camped next to a railroad track where noisy and fast electric trains woke us up early in the morning. Still another time, in Lausanne, we were afraid the wind was going to blow our tent away and we tied it down with our clothesline rope. In one campground in Germany I had a shouting match with a German lady who complained about our children playing ball on the driveway through the camp. Most of our experiences were positive, however, and we met up with many nice people, including several from Canada.

In France we had our first exposure to what looked like very primitive squat-type toilets. I did not really want to drive into Paris, so we camped near Versailles and took the train into Paris—a busy city. We crossed five or six lanes of traffic on foot near the Arc de Triomphe because we did not realize that there was an underground passage, and we survived that experience. We climbed partway up the Eiffel Tower and had a good view of the city from there. On the train from Versailles to Paris we met up with some American students who wanted to try their French on our children, without much success, of course.

We had booked passage on the Hovercraft ferry back to England, but high winds kept the vessels in port and we had no choice but to go back on the regular ferry. We camped near Dover, returned our rented camping equipment, went to see the very large Canterbury Cathedral, and stopped in for a nice visit with Edmonton neighbour David Chinnery's parents in Bromley in east London. By the time we got back to Hampton Poyle, it was nearly midnight and it felt good to be 'home' again. We had seen many things in our travels, and our van and camping gear had served us well for the nearly 5000 kilometers we covered.

Before long we had to start thinking about going back to Canada, of course. Our travel plans were not terribly complete—all we had to that point was a set of relatively cheap one-way tickets from London to New York on a charter flight. From there on there was no plan yet. We did have a booking for shipping our van to Canada, though, for delivery in Vancouver. Then suddenly, the roof caved in. I had gone to London earlier to pick up our plane tickets, and some things sounded a bit fishy. What we did not expect at all was the telephone call on Friday night that our Monday flight had been cancelled, "because of some irregularities". Now what? We were promised a refund on our tickets but we did not have lot of confidence in that. And we did not have enough money in our English bank account to make other arrangements. No credit cards, of course; those had not been invented yet. But, our close neighbour Eric Cox was the assistant manager of the bank. Surely he could help us.

I went to see him on Saturday morning and told him about our predicament. I asked him if he would honour a cheque on our Oxford bank account if I gave him a cheque on our Edmonton bank account. He immediately agreed, and our cash flow problem was solved. I went to a travel agency, bought six tickets to take us from London to Chicago on Monday, and we had a plan again. Thus reassured, we got ourselves ready to leave on Monday morning. Our first stop in London was the upstairs place on a back street where I had picked up the tickets for the cancelled New York flight earlier. After waiting a half hour my turn came, and surprise, surprise, the man behind the desk actually gave me the equivalent of \$500 in cash, the exact amount we had paid for the tickets in the first place. Wonderful!

We drove our van to the shipping place and delivered it, along with a bunch of stuff we had packed under the back seat, such as children's boots and some tools, and got two taxis to take us and our luggage to the airport. I had chosen not to tell Dixie that the insurance on our van had expired the day before, but we had no accidents so it no longer mattered. What we did have to do is figure out how to get from the Chicago airport to Randolph where our car was stored. I wrote some information on a piece of paper and handed it to an airline gate agent with some money, asking her to send a telegram to Frank and Jeanette. I probably sent a flight number and a time but not the name of the airline, because we later heard that they had to some sleuthing to find out just where we were going to arrive. True to form, however, they got the right information, solved a dead battery problem in our car, and were at the Chicago airport to meet us when we arrived. Needless to say, we were very happy to see them, because we really had no idea what to expect.

We stayed and rested for a few days, enjoyed a big family potluck supper, and showed some of the one thousand slides I had accumulated during the time we were gone. Then it was time to hook up our trailer and head home to Edmonton. For some reason, that part of the trip did not seem long at all. I don't think any of us kissed the ground when we crossed the border into Canada and then into Alberta but we certainly felt like it and we were happy to be really home again. The Stonehockers had left our house in fine shape and neighbour Marilyn Chinnery had arranged for movers to get our furniture up from the basement corner to the rooms where it belonged—something we had not thought about at all but were very happy to see. It was time to pick up where we had left off a year earlier.

We had had a farewell family picnic in Hawrelak Park in June 1969 before we left on our journey to California and we had a repeat picnic in the same place in September 1970 soon after we returned. It was a nice time to reconnect with our family members.

A month or so later we received word that our van had arrived in Vancouver, and I flew there to pick it up. The van was in fine shape but whatever we had stashed under the back seat was gone, probably stolen; perhaps removed by the shipping people to meet regulations that we were not told about. Not that the stuff was so valuable, but we were disappointed just the same that it was all gone. I had supper with Ed and Shirley Piers and started the drive home, thinking I would find a motel somewhere for the night but didn't. I slept in the van for a while until I got cold and woke up again and then drove on home the rest of the way. The van served us well for the next three years but it was so cold in the winter time, even with the gas heater I had installed in it, that we decided not to keep it any longer. It sold readily, and we replaced it with something that would keep us warm. More about that later.
