

Zoo Traveler

I really like to travel (NO FLYING THOUGH!), and we were fortunate enough to do lots of it – before we had so many little kids, of course. We still try to make a yearly trip to Florida, especially while we can still fit the entire family in one car – something that soon won't be easily accomplished as the kids grow older. At each travel destination, I have to admit that my favorite tourist attraction is always the local zoo. I made a list of all the zoos and/or wildlife parks I have visited, and I hope to add to it soon! Here is the list by state, country, or territory, followed by the city in which it's located. An asterisk following the zoo means it no longer exists. I put notes about some of the places in *italics* as sort of a guide in case you're interested in visiting one of those particular attractions and want some info straight from a tourist's mouth.

California:

Sea World San Diego

San Diego Zoo

Canada:

Bird Kingdom Niagara Falls Aviary, Niagara Falls, Ontario

Marineland, Niagara Falls, Ontario – *this place is very cool. You can hand-feed deer, Beluga Whales or even Orcas (Killer Whales). You can throw food down to bears who beg and do tricks. There are also a variety of amusement park rides for the whole family. Look at me petting the Orca!*



Washington, DC

National Zoo

Florida:

Wooten's Wildlife Park, Florida Everglades – *a cool, family owned place where you can see animals on display; including alligators, crocodiles, and Florida panthers. You can also hold and feed baby alligators! I wonder if they still exist; their website hasn't been updated since '06!*

Sea World, Orlando

Gatorland, Orlando

Animal Kingdom, Orlando

Idaho:

Zoo Boise, Boise

Illinois:

Brookfield Zoo, Brookfield – *this is the zoo I grew up going*

to. In the 80's when I was a frequent visitor, they had many 'celebrity' animals, with interesting stories to match.

Shedd Aquarium, Chicago

Peoria Wildlife Park, Peoria

Cosley Zoo, Wheaton

Glen Oak Zoo, Peoria

Henson Robinson Zoo, Springfield

Miller Park Zoo, Bloomington – yuck, not one of my favorite places. Their tiger exhibits consisted of teeny tiny cages, and they had a really scrawny, terrible looking tiger, at least in the late '90's when we lived in the area. Hopefully they've cleaned the place up.

Scovill Zoo, Decatur

Indiana:

Ft Wayne Children's Zoo – a perfectly sized zoo to visit with kids. They have a wide variety of animals and some nice exhibits. They just recently built a chair-lift type ride that will take you over the lion exhibit once it's finished – cool and scary at the same time!

Potawatomi Zoo, South Bend

Fun Spot, Angola

Michigan:

Binder Park, Battle Creek

Minnesota:

Minneapolis Zoo, Minneapolis

Missouri:

St Louis Zoo, St. Louis

Nebraska:

Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha – I know they've since rebuilt it, but when I visited back in 2001-2002, they had a teeny-tiny exhibit for the gorillas, which made them none too happy. I actually witnessed a huge male gorilla charge a kid and beat on the glass from his small exhibit – scary!

Henry Doorly safari park, Omaha

Folsom Children's Zoo, Lincoln – *a very nice little zoo located in the heart of Lincoln. It's so well-laid out that you can forget you're in the middle of a capital city, and they have lots of animals in a variety of nice exhibits.*

Ohio:

African Safari Wildlife Park, Port Clinton – *I love this place! You can feed deer, elands, huge buffalo and a variety of hoofed mammals from the comfort of your own vehicle. In season, they have pig races, animals shows, and camel and pony rides for the little ones.*

Akron Zoo, Akron – *I was really impressed with the layout, exhibits, and the happiness of the animals – a very impressive little zoo!*

Cincinnati Zoo, Cincinnati

Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Cleveland

Columbus Zoo, Columbus – *a zoo no one had heard about until my favorite celebrity, Jack Hanna got ahold of it and made it a world-reknown facility. Huge zoo, and the only place to see my favorite animals, manatees in my home state of Ohio!*

**Sea World Ohio, Aurora – we actually lived in Illinois at the time we visited here, but I'm glad we got to see it before they sold it to Six Flags, who sold it to Cedar Fair. Any of the other Sea Worlds are quite a hike from IL or OH for that matter, especially for a non-flyer such as myself.*

Toledo Zoo, Toledo

Pennsylvania:

Pittsburgh Zoo – *very impressive zoo! Lots of kid-friendly playgrounds and interactive areas. The polar bear habitat looked really cool – people go through a tunnel that the bears can swim over – but we didn't see it since the bears weren't in the pool. I NEED a second look at this zoo and will definitely allow more time when I get back there!*

ZOOAMERICA North American Wildlife Park, Hershey – *We did not care for this zoo at all. We visited in the late '90's, so*

maybe they've added more to it by now. But at that time, they only had animals indigenous to North America, and let's face it, those are easy to spot in most areas of the U.S. And let's face it, the real star tourist destination in Hershey is the chocolate factory!

South Dakota:

Great Plains Zoo and Museum, Sioux Falls – I visited here with my family when I was 15. This place was amusing to us because attached to the zoo is the museum, which has many taxidermied specimens. We joked that this zoo had more dead animals than live ones!

**Marineland, Rapid City – note the asterisk, this place doesn't exist anymore, thank goodness. When we visited in the summer of '93, they had dolphins and sea lions held in such tiny cages and pools, it was sickening. I haven't been able to find much info on this place, but I'm sure they were shut down because of poor treatment of their animals. I can only hope the animals found a better home.*

Bear Country USA, Rapid City – a cool drive-thru bear habitat experience – keep those windows rolled up!!! And check out the baby bear nursery – so adorable!

Wisconsin:

Henry Vilas Zoo, Madison

**Serpent Safari, Wisconsin Dells*

GRAND TOTAL AS OF 2009:

41 animal-themed places in 2 countries, 13 states, 1 district... and counting!

A Living Breathing Hoax

A while ago, I decided to write a series within my blog about animals, my favorite things. I just can't find enough time to learn about animals, and I love sharing knowledge about their incredible attributes. Here is chapter two in my Interesting Animals series. To read chapter one about a scaly mammal called the pangolin, [click here](#).

For chapter two, I chose to focus on the duck-billed platypus; an animal who is so strange looking that people thought it to be a hoax when it was first discovered in 1798.

The platypus is one of 3-5 species (depending on the source – animal knowledge is very differential) of monotremes or egg-laying mammals. I know, at one point we were all taught that one of the characteristics of mammals is that they give birth to live young, but that is not the case. Monotremes lay eggs, and the platypus join echidnas (spiny anteaters) in this animal order. The platypus is found in Australia – seems like they have all the cool animals, doesn't it? I just wish they weren't so stingy with their animals. I know they stopped loaning out the Tasmanian Devil years ago, and now that the last one died (it resided in Fort Wayne Indiana until its death – I could kick myself for not making the less than hour trip over there to see it while it was alive), the only place to see them is in Australia. The same goes for the platypus. I've visited many zoos, and I've never seen a live platypus. A quick check on the internet reveals that they are only found in Australian zoos.

But anyway, aside from being an aquatic (with water-repellent fur), egg-laying mammal, another cool thing about the platypus is that the males are actually poisonous. Both genders have a spur on their left foot, but the males' spur produces enough venom to really hurt a human being. Here is a picture of the duck-billed platypus – note the soft, leathery duck-bill which

is actually used by the animal to sense the electric fields caused by its moving prey (feeds on shrimp, fish eggs, small fish, and aquatic invertebrates found in streams and lakes).



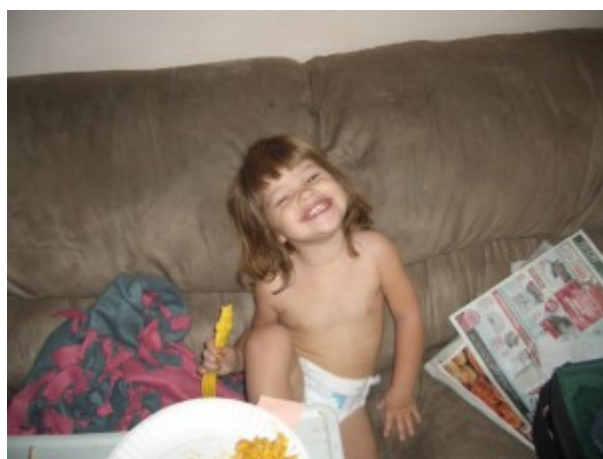
Easy to see how this duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed, egg-laying mammal was once thought to be an elaborate man-made fraud, huh?

Me Want Cookie

Jamiahsh, a fellow blogger friend of mine, had a point when he noted that it's been a long time since one of my famous anti-Walmart posts. I hate the place, but as a mom of 4, I don't have any other options that compare to the time and money I

reluctantly have to admit I save shopping at Walmart. It's just their dirty tricks that drive me crazy, and I've ranted about those long enough – if you're interested, flip through my blog posts and search for Walmart. Right now, I need to address my most current Walmart disappointment: no more free cookies for the kids.

Those of you who have kids know that Walmart used to give out cookies at the bakery as a sort of rescue for tiresome kids whose parents are taking too long with their shopping. I shop at Walmart once, sometimes twice a week. It is a familiar habit for my two-year-old to get her cookie at the bakery while we shop. If I'm lucky, it will keep her busy until I hit the dairy section. But the other day during my weekly visit to Walmart, imagine my surprise when the lady in the bakery said they didn't have any cookies. Not only that, she thinks they won't have them anymore, ever. She wasn't sure because the lady who usually handles the cookies (?) was on vacation. Sounds like a cop-out to me... I mean, is there really a lady who regularly handles the cookies? I think she just didn't want to have to tell this angel-face 'no cookie':



My daughter actually took it quite well... of course, I bought her a pack of donuts instead... It's not that I'm a softie, but I just don't think it's fair that a two-year-old should have to bear the brunt of a mega-company's policy change. They gave cookies every time before this, and she has had to sit in the shopping cart and be good and do her time, and now all of

a sudden, no cookie? So I HAD to buy her a replacement treat, at least for this shopping trip. Maybe in the future, I'll try to prepare her ahead of time or just bring my own treat from home. But in the mean time, their little plan worked, didn't it? Lure all the housemoms over to the bakery to get free cookies for their kids... over time, they will grow to expect it, and then one day, no free cookies will cause them to *pay money* for something else for their kids – \$CA-CHING\$!

I admit it was a nice gesture on Walmart's part to offer the free cookies in the first place. Then again, we do spend enough over there; they should be able to afford it... But it was a nice little perk, and as I said, something for the kids to look forward to about shopping at Walmart... But in the end, it ended up being just another disappointment from our favorite big box retailer.

Our local non-Walmart grocery store still has free cookies for the kids, AND they're fresh baked... If I find more time and money, maybe I will make it a point to do more of our shopping over there...

How about your grocery store? Is it a small mom-and-pop-owned place or a big box retailer? Do they give free cookies to the kids?

Checkup Time!

INSERT DISK HERE:



My son Christopher passed his 6 month baby checkup at the pediatrician with flying colors. If only adult physical tests were this easy – pass a block from hand to hand, pick up a raisin (which was promptly taken away because he's too little – where's the reward in that?), a turn of the head when your name is called... He has mastered all of it and is right where he should be developmentally. Except for one thing – sitting up. No I didn't forget the 'p' – he *has* mastered *spitting* up... haha. But he can't *sit* up unassisted yet, and he doesn't even seem to be close to doing so. The problem is that he refuses to bend at the waist. If I can get him into a sitting position, (and that's a big IF!) he arches his back immediately and tries to stand. I tried to explain this to the nurse so she wouldn't think he is physically slow, but he lost points anyway. Never mind that he can use his legs to jump vigorously in his bouncer that hangs from the doorway, or that he can single-handedly pull and move a heavy dining room chair with his iron grip – he still loses points for not being able to sit unassisted. Oh well, if that's how they score it, that's how they score it. It's not like it bothers me at all; I actually find it amusing. I think he might be crawling and walking before he sits...

Other news from the doctor appointment is that he weighs 16 lbs. 13oz. which is in the 30 percentile for weight. An easy explanation of the percentile comparison is this: If you take 100 babies my son's age, 30 of them would be at his weight or

lower and 70 of them would weigh more than he does. He is $27\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, which puts him in the 75th percentile for height. His head circumference is 45.2 cm which is exactly average. I think he is probably our most average-sized baby; our oldest was always small for her age and the two in the middle were huge – Disney was once in the 100th percentile for height! Just another example of how different kids are, even ones in the same family. My 4 children physically remind me of each other, yet it's so fun to watch their differences emerge as they learn and grow! Here are Disney and Christopher, my two youngest:



You Live In Chicago If...

Even though I don't live in Chicago anymore (thank goodness because I'm not a big fan of crowds or traffic, two things which help define the city!), I still appreciate the humor in the following forward sent to me by a relative who ironically also moved away from the Chicago area a few years ago. If you've ever lived in or near the 3rd largest city in the country, or even if you've just visited Chicago a few times, you will be able to appreciate the humor in the following one-liners:

If your local Dairy Queen is closed from September through May, you live in Chicago.

If you've worn shorts and a winter coat at the same time, you live in Chicago.

If you've had a telephone conversation using more Spanish than you thought you knew with someone who dialed a wrong number, you live in Chicago.

If "vacation" means going anywhere south of I - 80 for the weekend, you live in Chicago.

If you measure distance in hours, you live in Chicago.

If you have switched from "heat" to "A/C" in the same day and back again, you live in Chicago.

If you can drive 75 mph through 2 feet of snow during a raging blizzard without flinching, you live in Chicago.

If you carry jumpers in your car and your wife knows how to use them, you live in Chicago.

If you design your kid's Halloween costume to fit over a snowsuit, you live in Chicago.

If the speed limit on the highway is 55 mph - you're going 80 and everybody is passing you, you live in Chicago.

If driving is better in the winter because the potholes are filled with snow, you live in Chicago.

If you know all 4 seasons: almost winter, winter, still winter and road construction, you live in Chicago.

If you have more miles on your snow blower than your car, you live in Chicago.

If you find 10 degrees "a little chilly", you live in Chicago.

Presidential In-Laws

In-laws have a bad stigma in our country, to say the least. From sayings like, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your relatives” or “When you marry your spouse, you’re marrying her whole family” to classic TV shows which depict the dreaded mother-in-law as a horrible threat or consequence for a character’s bad behavior (The Honeymooner’s, Bewitched, The Flintstones, to name just a few), in-laws definitely have a bad rap. Scenes from these shows flooded my brain recently when I read the following article on cnn.com – seems even the leaders of the free world have had problematic situations with their mothers-in-law. The reason the article was published is because apparently Barack Obama’s mother-in-law, wife Michelle’s mother Marian Robinson, might move with the new first family to Washington. So will Mr. Obama’s situation be comparative to poor Harry Truman, whose mother-in-law refused to call him anything but Mr. Truman? Or will it be more like Dwight Eisenhower, who got along famously with his mother-in-law – in a good way? In recognition of Inauguration Day, read the following article for some interesting historical lessons about the complex familial relationships formed as a result of the union of two people:

From cnn.com, by David Holzel

(Mental Floss) – President-Elect Obama’s mother-in-law will be moving to Washington with the first family, at least temporarily, his transition team has confirmed. Marian Robinson will be the latest in a line of presidential in-laws who, for good or ill, lived under the same roof as the president.

President Dwight Eisenhower and his mother-in-law, Elivera Doud, pose for pictures with some of the grandchildren.

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Here are four stories that confirm the old truism: While America can choose its president, the president can't choose his in-laws.

1. Ulysses S. Grant and 'The Colonel'

You would think that the Civil War was settled at Appomattox, and no question of its outcome would have been raised in the White House of Ulysses S. Grant, who, after all, was the general who won the war.

But you would be wrong, because living with Ulysses and Julia Grant was the president's father-in-law. Colonel Frederick Dent (his rank seems to have been self-selected) was an unreconstructed Confederate, a St. Louis businessman and slaveholder who, when his daughter Julia went to the Executive Mansion early in 1869, decided to relocate there as well.

The Colonel didn't hesitate to make himself at home. When his daughter received guests, he sat in a chair just behind her, offering anyone within earshot unsolicited advice. Political and business figures alike got a dose of the Colonel's mind as they waited to meet with President Grant.

When the president's father, Jesse Grant, came from Kentucky on one of his regular visits to Washington, the White House turned into a Civil War reenactment. According to "First Families: The Impact of the White House on Their Lives", by Bonnie Angelo, Jesse Grant preferred to stay in a hotel rather than sleep under the same roof as the Colonel.

And when the two old partisans found themselves unavoidably sitting around the same table in the White House, they avoided direct negotiations by using Julia and her young son, named for the president's father, as intermediaries, Betty Boyd Caroli writes in "First Ladies": "In the presence of the elder

Grant, Frederick Dent would instruct Julia to 'take better care of that old gentleman [Jesse Grant]. He is feeble and deaf as a post and yet you permit him to wander all over Washington alone.' And Grant replied [to his grandson and namesake], 'Did you hear him? I hope I shall not live to become as old and infirm as your Grandfather Dent.'

The Colonel remained in the White House – irascible and unrepentant – until his death, at age 88, in 1873.

2. Harry S Truman and the Mother-in-Law from Heck

Harry Truman and Bess Wallace met as children. He was a farm boy; she was the well-heeled granddaughter of Independence, Missouri's Flour King. When they married in 1919, Truman was a struggling haberdasher, and Bess's mother, Madge Wallace, thought Bess had made a colossal social faux pas. Until she died in 1952, Madge Wallace never changed her mind about Harry Truman. Her Bess had married way below her station.

Madge had plenty of opportunities to let her son-in-law know it. The newlyweds moved into the Wallace mansion in Independence, and the three lived together under the same roof until the end of Madge's life.

When Harry Truman was elected senator, "Mother Wallace," as Truman judiciously called her, moved with her daughter and son-in-law to Washington. In the family's apartment, she shared a bedroom with the Trumans' daughter, Margaret. And when Truman became president, she moved with them into the White House, where she cast her cold eye on the new commander-in-chief.

"Why would Harry run against that nice Mr. Dewey?" she wondered aloud, as Truman was fighting for his political life in the 1948 presidential race, according to "First Mothers" by Bonnie Angelo. And when Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur for insubordination, Mother Wallace was scandalized. "Imagine a captain from the National Guard [Truman] telling off a West

Point general!"

In December 1952, shortly before Truman's term ended, Madge Wallace died, at age 90. For the 33 years they lived together, she never called her son-in-law anything but "Mr. Truman" to his face.

3. Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Mother-in-Law of the Year

If Truman's story sounds like the set-up for a film noir, his successor's relationship with his mother-in-law might have been a Technicolor musical.

Elivera Mathilda Carlson Doud, Mamie Eisenhower's mother, was "a witty woman with a tart tongue," Time magazine wrote, and Dwight Eisenhower thought she was a hoot. "She refuted every mother-in-law joke ever made," Time wrote. There was no question that she would join her daughter and son-in-law in the White House.

Ike called her "Min," the name of a character in the Andy Gump comic strip. Ike and Min "constituted a mutual admiration society, and each took the other's part whenever a family disagreement would arise," said Eisenhower's son, John. The New York Times observed, "The president frequently looks around him sharply, and inquires, 'Where's Min?'"

Widowed shortly before Eisenhower became president, Min spent the winters in the White House and summers at her home in Denver. It was while visiting his mother-in-law's home that Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in 1955. Two years later, in failing health, Min returned permanently to Denver. She died in 1960, at age 82.

4. Benjamin Harrison and the Reverend Doctor

Benjamin Harrison's father-in-law, John Witherspoon Scott, bore a double title: "reverend doctor."

Scott was born in Pennsylvania in 1800, did post-graduate work

at Yale and took a professorship in mathematics and science at Miami University, in Ohio. He was also a Presbyterian minister and an outspoken abolitionist. The reverend doctor was rumored to have shielded runaway slaves in his home as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Whatever the truth, Miami University dismissed him for his anti-slavery beliefs.

He accepted a post at Farmer's College, a prep school in Cincinnati, where he became a mentor of a student named Benjamin Harrison. During his visits to the Scott home, Harrison became friendly with the reverend doctor's daughter, Caroline.

Young Harrison spent so many evenings at the Scotts' home that he got the nickname "the pious moonlight dude," according to "The Complete Book of the Presidents" by William A. DeGregorio. He and Caroline were married in 1853 at the bride's house. The reverend doctor officiated.

John Witherspoon Scott later became a clerk in the pension office of the interior department. He gave up the position when Harrison was elected president in 1888. A widower since 1876, Scott moved into the White House with his daughter and their family.

It was the president's custom to lead the family in a half-hour of Bible reading and prayer after breakfast, Anne Chieko Moore and Hester Anne Hale wrote in "Benjamin Harrison: Centennial President." When the president was absent, his father-in-law took his place.

Caroline Harrison died in October 1892, two weeks before her husband lost the presidential election. Her father died the next month, at age 92. An obituary described John Witherspoon Scott as "a man of wonderful physical vigor, tall, broad chested and well preserved mentally."

This Town's Got Talent AND Faith

I already wrote about our 3D movie-going experience in my previous post, so I will skip that part of the weekend here, but I neglected to mention the cool restaurant we found because I didn't want to enlarge an already lengthy post...

Friday night after seeing My Bloody Valentine 3D in Maumee Ohio, a suburb of Toledo, we noticed a restaurant across the street called Nick's Cafe who advertises breakfast all day. My husband and I are both Eggs Benedict connoisseurs – we really appreciate a great-tasting serving of Eggs Benedict, which is a breakfast dish consisting of English Muffin halves topped with Canadian bacon, poached eggs, and a layer of Hollandaise sauce. In our pre-parenthood days, we explored the country and sampled various versions of the dish along the way to our traveler's goals; whether they were destinations of business or pleasure. A requirement of great Eggs Benedict is homemade Hollandaise sauce, and by 'homemade', we (unlike many of the restaurants we tried) don't mean mixed up in the kitchen from a package. You need a double boiler to make it, and good Hollandaise sauce has nothing to do with a powder or a package. In all of our travels, we never found anything that even compares to the Hollandaise sauce at Uptown Cafe in downtown Arlington Heights, Illinois. We've visited numerous restaurants in our quest, and we've called some of them ahead of time, but even if you ask if their Hollandaise sauce is homemade, many will say yes, even if we don't agree on the definition of homemade. Such was the case Friday night at Nick's Cafe in Maumee, Ohio. They said their hollandaise sauce was homemade on the phone, but oddly, when we arrived, they wouldn't let us taste a sample. That was a first! Of

the dozens of restaurants we've visited in search of the perfect Eggs Benedict, no restaurant had ever denied us a sample! On Friday night, my husband bravely ordered the Eggs Benedict at Nick's Cafe without trying the Hollandaise sauce ahead of time, and disappointingly, it was of the non-homemade, out-of-the-package variety. He did say that the Canadian bacon on the Eggs Benedict was great, but it unfortunately cannot rescue the dish if it uses packaged Hollandaise. So negative Eggs Benedict experience aside, the reason I would highly recommend this place is for their Mediterranean cuisine. And regular readers of my blog (and of those email forward all-about-you quizzes) know that this is my favorite type of food, therefore I am a huge critic. But Nick's Place in Maumee has excellent gyros, Tzatziki sauce, and Greek salads. Gyros are only good when they're off the spit and even then, it's easy for them to taste too salty. Not the case at Nick's Place; if you like Mediterranean food, I **highly** recommend their gyros and Greek salads – incredible.

But I must move on to Saturday afternoon, when we took our kids to see the movie, [Hotel for Dogs](#). I've been waiting for this movie for months, which is probably why we didn't want to cancel our planned outing there on Saturday even though Kid #1 went off her rocker. Seriously, the kid went berserk and I was really tempted to give her "the talk", especially after I noticed a pimple on her cheek... (well, one of 'the talks' anyway – the one about womanly bodily changes – she's 9 years old and I would rather we talk about puberty stuff *before* it happens to her). But anyway, she'd probably be *mortified* if she knew I was posting this on the internet (what are mothers for?), so I better get off this tangent... After the episode Saturday morning, our oldest really didn't deserve to go to the movie, but it's difficult in a large family to not 'let the bad apple spoil the bunch'. Our younger girls had been very good all morning, so why keep them (or me!) from going to the movie? Our oldest was punished for the tantrum by having to go without a Kid's Pack (popcorn, pop, and candy) at the

movies, and to her credit, she was mature about the consequences of her actions. However, soon after our arrival at the movie theater, the tide changed and our 2-year-old became the problem. I don't know why we keep trying to take a 2-year-old to the movie theater, but every time, it's regrettable. Actually, it's been this way since even *months* before she turned two... I guess we keep hoping that one of these times, she'll actually settle down enough to enjoy an entire movie without driving anyone crazy. So anyway, I'm trying to keep our 6-month-old busy and quiet while attempting to watch *Hotel For Dogs* and not disturb our neighbors, and my husband is busy with our handful of a 4-year-old, so next thing we know, our two-year-old is drinking my Mountain Dew. Of course she loves it, but even *before* the Mountain Dew she's had a sugar-infused Kid's Pack, and now she's practically bouncing off the walls. She smiles and announces in a loud voice, "**I take clothes off!**", so now I'm trying to put my son back in his car seat so I can stop his sister from stripping off her clothes right there in the movie theater... Too late. She is down to her diaper by the time I get both hands free, so my husband covers her with a coat. For some reason, she's willing to wear nothing but a coat and a diaper in the movie theater, and somehow we make it through the rest of the movie without having to leave. So as for *Hotel For Dogs*, I liked it (I think – I actually didn't see much of it)... it's a cute, predictable fun movie, and if you're a dog lover, there's plenty of canine eye candy.

Following the movie, I went to a local talent show based upon the popular "American Idol" TV show. Some great friends graciously stayed with the kids, and my husband also stayed home to catch up on the work he missed last week during the 2-hour-school delay and the school closing we have on Friday and Monday. He works from home, and it's all I can do to keep the two little ones out of his hair every day – add the older two to the mix and all Hell breaks loose – any chance of getting anything productive done flies out the window. So, a strange

occurrence at the talent show – me, myself, and I for a change. I did attend with friends, but it's not like I would bother Carol next to me with my philosophies on music or the tone of one's voice; that would be something to make my husband endure. And it was bizarre to simply sit back and listen and watch the show... For those hours, I had absolutely **not one thing** else to do besides enjoy the show... such a change of pace for me and much appreciated. Not that I would want to experience that all the time, but it was very nice for one night...

Adding to the relaxation for me was the spiritual tone of the evening. I had known the event would be sponsored by a local church, but I didn't realize that we, the audience, would be praying to both open and to close the show; as well as the fact that the majority of the acts were religion-themed. As I said, for me, it was refreshing and relaxing, but I think they should properly advertise such a theme if they do this again next year. Less open-minded people may have been displeased. My dear friend and the entire reason I was a part of this concert experience in the first place, performed wonderfully and I was pleasantly surprised to be able to pick out her voice from the rest of the delightful group with whom she performed. Despite my best efforts to vote for them, however, they didn't win the competition, and the top prizes went to a drama group from the church who sponsored the event (!), a very talented violinist, and a well-known local talent who is only a Junior in high school but who has already been a vocalist with the Toledo Opera going on her 3rd year. Besides seeing and hearing my friend perform, my favorite part of the evening was when a boy who was part of the drama group that won burst into tears. Their skit was acted out to music, and it portrayed a young girl being bullied by 'temptations' but ultimately triumphing over sins and choosing Jesus. The group got a standing ovation after they performed and because they were from the church that sponsored the event, it was no surprise when they won first prize in the competition, but the

kid asked the crowd, “I just want to know that everyone was moved – was everyone moved?” There was applause and verbal affirmations, and the next thing I knew, the kid had burst into tears and it slightly reminded me of the movie [Leap of Faith](#)... But it was sweet and real, and I was glad to be a part of it. Even though the talent show did a poor job of advertising the theme of the show; thereby the religion kind of snuck up on its patrons, it was a welcome and calming change of pace – at least for this member of the audience. And even though I wasn’t aware that I needed it, the evening restored my faith while proving to me yet again what a great place it is in Northwest Ohio to raise kids – we have so much talent and so many opportunities here for our youth!

My Bloody Valentine 3D

It’s almost embarrassing to admit that I saw a movie called, [“My Bloody Valentine 3D”](#). But the reason I’m writing a blog about it is because I actually *liked* it. A true slasher film; the grisly violence was excessive. But I actually didn’t find myself rolling my eyes at the constant gore fest, which is what I did during the last few movies in the Saw franchise. In the poorer quality Saw movies, some of the violence doesn’t really even make sense. It’s almost like they’re trying to see how far they can go, how shocking they can be, and what they can get away with, even if it’s not integral to the plot. My Bloody Valentine 3D actually has a well-developed, interesting plot. If you don’t pay attention to the newspaper headlines that *come out of the screen* in the beginning of the movie (very cool 3D effect – definitely more on those later), the plot might actually be hard to follow. I know, a good plot is unheard of for a slasher flick, but I was even left to piece together some plot details after the movie was over.

Not that it was *too* hard to follow, just a lot of continuous action that makes it difficult for one to think about character relationships and how they relate to the plot while also watching the movie. So for my best attempt at a plot synopsis, here we go...

Harmony is a small mining town where everyone knows everyone else, and the mine is the lifeblood of the town. The filmmakers very successfully give the audience a good feel for the sleepy little mining town. Decades ago, there was an accident in the mine which was initially blamed on the owner of the mine, Hanniger. When it was found that the victims of the mining accident were actually brutally murdered, it was blamed upon the sole survivor of the accident, Harry Warden, who is left in a coma. A few decades later, he wakes up and slaughters 22 people, including a group of teenagers having a party at the mine. Four of the revelers make it out alive, and flash forward 10 years to now. Hanniger's son (he was one of the 4 survivors) returns to the town as a new rash of murders unfold, and he finds himself accused of the brutal crimes. There's actually more to it than that, but this kind of gives you an idea about the movie. The plot and direction of the movie allow the audience to never be sure who to suspect of the murders, and there are various twists and turns. Very well done for a horror movie, especially one belonging to the slasher genre. Now on to the 3D effects...

3D does not often work for me because my eyesight is very uneven – I have near perfect vision in my left eye, and terrible vision in my right eye. But I was sure to bring my eyeglasses, which kind of levels the playing field for my eyes, and so when I wore the 3D glasses on top of my regular eyeglasses, the 3D worked very well. I've been to various 3D shows at Disney World and Universal Studios, and I would say those are the best of the best – but even they don't always work for me; sometimes I have to squint to be able to see the 3D. But now it seems there have been some advancements in the

technology, and it's clear the movie industry wants to showcase these advancements given the rash of 3D movie previews I've seen in the theaters recently. Among the 3D features that will be out in 2009 are: Monsters and Aliens, Up, Disney's a Christmas Carol 3D, Ice Age 3, and Toy Story in 3D. But anyway, My Bloody Valentine 3D was very cool – the entire movie was actually in 3D for me, and all I had to do was sit there – no fiddling with glasses, no squinting... and that was a first for me. The murderer's weapon of choice is a miner's ax, and there were many times it would actually appear to come out of the screen (along with disgusting bits of gore, of course)! Besides that effect, other things about the movie were cool because of the 3D as well; even scenes that consisted exclusively of dialogue.

As one reviewer on imdb.com mentioned, My Bloody Valentine 3D does not take itself too seriously – and that's a good thing. In fact, a few months ago when we first saw the movie's preview and tagline "Nothing says 'date movie' like a 3D ride to Hell!", we thought it was a joke... you know, one of those "previews" that actually ends up being a commercial. But it was for a real movie, and so we couldn't resist venturing to the big city to utilize a free voucher we had gotten on a previous visit to see the otherwise expensive 3D ride to Hell. If you are a fan of horror movies, My Bloody Valentine 3D is a must-see. I'm not sure how this movie would translate to a regular screen. It might still be a good horror movie, but given the 3D effects, it was nothing short of awesome! I would almost classify it as a sort of haunted house experience, except you're sitting in a seat and not walking around. If you look at it that way, the \$13.50 price tag (\$11 matinee) would be a bargain for the over 90 minute experience compared to admission at most haunted houses. Of course, haunted houses don't have the extra-long, very gratuitous nude scene, which I could have definitely done without, but since that's my only complaint about the movie, overall I would definitely consider it an afternoon well-spent with hubby (no

we did not take the kids to this feature!) After all, nothing says 'date movie' like a 3D ride to Hell! Apparently so!

The Unborn Gran Torino

Luckily for us, Tuesday's date night was not hindered by the recent barrage of snow in any way. We ventured to the larger town nearby to see what all the Golden Globe fuss was about Clint Eastwood's latest movie, [Gran Torino](#) (they didn't have [Slumdog Millionaire](#)). But after the previews and especially when the movie started, it became painfully obvious that there was something wrong with the theater's sound – you couldn't hear the dialogue. My husband went to report it, and all that did was cause several loud popping noises and lengthy annoying electronic burps while they tried to fix it. There were 3 other people in the theater with us, and we all left – seemed like a movie where you really need to hear what the characters are saying. They offered our money back, but that wasn't really enough because we had spent \$7 on pop and popcorn that we wouldn't have bought if we weren't going to a movie. The incredibly flustered but sensible kid working the counter saw our point, and apparently his manager agreed, so they let us go into another movie AND get a refund – COOL! Earlier in the day, we had been up in the air trying to decide between seeing Gran Torino and The Unborn anyway, so I guess the choice was made for us – We only had 20 minutes to kill before a showing of [The Unborn](#).

The Unborn was just as I expected – a PG13-rated supernatural horror movie, not quite as good as others in the genre like The Ring, Shutter, or One Missed Call. There were some jump-out-of-your-seat moments in The Unborn, but it was obvious when they were coming, at least to me. I don't want to give

away too much like an article did that I read in the newspaper, so I'll just say that if you like the supernatural horror genre, check out *The Unborn* because it's entertaining. Back to the newspaper article I read... seems the little boy who plays a scary kid in the movie is from the area where I grew up, so they featured him in the suburban Chicago newspaper I sometimes like to read online – but they spilled a major spoiler about the movie at the end of the article! But anyway, that's another thing I enjoyed about *The Unborn* – it is set in Chicagoland, so I enjoyed the sweeping overhead views of the city and some of the familiar sites in suburbia. Apparently the screenwriter of *The Unborn*, David Goyer, has a fancy for Chicago since he also wrote *The Dark Knight* which was filmed in Chicago, although set in Gotham City. But anyway, enjoyable movie for what it was – I might have liked *Gran Torino* better, but I guess I'll have to see that one another time.

And that brings me to the Applebee's saga. We don't really like Applebee's. They try to tell us we belong there, but I don't buy it. Their food seems pricey for what it is, and we stopped going there when the kids are with us because their food takes *forever* to come out (that and the small fortune it would cost our family of 6 to eat there). My husband was given an Applebee's gift card for serving on the board of a local non-profit agency (no, I am not talking about the community theater – did you really have to ask?), which is really nice of the agency of course. We got the same gift card last year, and so back then we decided to give Applebee's another chance. Last year, we got some sort of bland pasta dish and an appetizer sampler and shared everything, but we left there hungry AND having to add money to our gift card in order to cover the check. Flash forward to now, and we find ourselves with another gift card. Time to give Applebee's another try, we decided; after all, how bad can it be? They have lots of corporate suits overseeing those kinds of places, so maybe they've implemented lots of changes in the past year

to make it a better establishment. Not the case. First, our food took forever to come out. I had gotten a soup-and-sandwich combo, and the waitress came to tell me they burnt the soup and it would be a few minutes while they made a new one. My husband wondered if that meant his food was sitting under a warmer while mine was re-prepared, and his concerns were legit because when he got his food, the shrimp was cold. Not only that, but they had given him the wrong kind of buffalo wings. So they apologized, and that's another thing about places like Applebee's that really bug me – the pesty fake gushy niceness. I do appreciate a friendly server, but the people who work at these places are way over the top... I will cite an example in the hilarious movie [Office Space](#) – there's a character in the movie who is Jennifer Aniston's coworker at a TGIFriday's type of place who acts just like these people... annoyingly and unrealistically enthusiastic about his job – funny stuff, but only in the movies.

So anyway, we're waiting for my husband's new wings when the manager comes out to say that they have now put the wrong sauce on them, and they'd have to make him yet *another* order. Honestly, what is the cook *doing* back there? Again, for the second time this day (see my Dawn's Great Idea post), my fears of starring in a hidden camera show run rampant... And what has happened to all the food that they've messed up? From just our party of 2, they must have had 2 orders of wings and a bowl of soup all go to waste. I've often thought that restaurants should have a deal with local homeless shelters, giving them their leftovers and food mistakes, but I guess that wouldn't be considered sanitary. I wish they'd change this; something tells me that food is food and many people would be very grateful for restaurant "leftovers"...

We calculated our bill correctly this time, and we were about to rid ourselves of the entire giftcard, when the waitress showed up to tell us that because of all the errors, they were going to give us the employee discount on the bill. That was

really really nice of them, but that means we STILL HAVE \$ LEFT ON THE GIFTCARD for another trip to Applebee's! I told my husband, maybe we'll just stop in for a couple drinks sometime, but of course, you can't use a giftcard on drinks, at least on alcoholic ones, and after trying their flavored tea yesterday, I won't be stopping in for any more of that – yuck! And in case you're wondering, both my sandwich and my soup were virtually tasteless, save for the cheese on top of the soup – that was really good!

[poll id="7"]

Dawn's Great Idea

My husband and I were in charge of our local community theater's version of the Oscars ceremony (ours is called The Willies™), so it was our responsibility to organize the skits, songs, and entertainment for the fun evening in December. In doing so, we needed to borrow a specific camera which played a prop in a very funny show that was staged in our community theater last year. My friend had borrowed the camera from her workplace, so I asked her if we could use it for a skit in the awards show and she obliged. She couldn't make it to the awards show, and I still haven't gotten the camera back to her. Through a series of email exchanges about how to get her the camera back, she came up with an idea: why not just drop it off at her husband's workplace – which is only 2 blocks away from my house – rather than drive the camera all the way out to her house in the country. Great idea, I told her, and I meant it... until I found myself walking into the county *courthouse* carrying an ominous large silver metal case.

Turns out, my friend's husband works in the county's adult

probation department, and so now I'm walking around the courthouse with something that looks, well, *extremely* fishy to say the least. My husband was with me, thank goodness, and I was glad to have the moral support because of the many strange stares we received... We found her husband's office, and when you enter the adult probation department, there is a counter with a bulletproof glass above it. So evidently, they tend to be skeptical of their visitors to begin with, and now here we are with our peculiarly large metal case. We asked to see my friend's husband (he knows us at least), but as luck would have it, he was out to lunch. "Can we just leave it here?" we were forced to ask, prompting a very skeptical probation officer to ask, "Is it ticking?" I started thinking about those signs they have at the airport that explain how joking about bombs or explosives is a felony offense, so I bit my lip, worried I might accidentally utter some sort of lame quip that would get us into deep trouble. My husband opened up the case and showed them what was inside... just a camera, we swear!

Not really a big deal, but a funny experience nonetheless. Had we been in a bigger city, we might have been thrown to the floor and cuffed – it really was a shady looking case, and I can't blame people for being a little cautious and apprehensive about it, especially in this day and age.

So thanks for saving me the trip out to the country, Dawn, but honestly, I don't think either of us thought this idea through... unless you were setting me up to get some sort of hidden camera prank footage, maybe to be shown at next year's Willie Awards™? ☐