

## Christmas 2021

GORDON: It's my fault that this is a Happy New Year letter instead of the usual Merry Whatever You Celebrate letter. I confess to a bad case of Long-Covid Procrastination complicated by massive deadline infestation dating to mid-November. I had a pretty quiet year until then, when another one of my old clients asked me to work on a project that HAD to be done by year end. Just as our birthdays (a ZERO year), Thanksgiving, a spate of LA Conservancy tours (love to do 'em, but they tie up a day), solar contractors, and all those concerts/plays/movies we had to catch up on hit simultaneously. All squeezed in around lockdowns and un-locks for COVID panics. What got pushed back was any Christmas prep – this letter is later than usual, and almost all of our presents are wrapped and delivered by SantAmazon.

We've enjoyed seeing all the picture cards from all our correspondents. They say a picture's worth a thousand words: I guess we're among the last of the believers in the thousand-words version.



The rains have finally come to SoCal after the driest eleven months on record, so I'm actually thinking about getting out the lawn mower – nice that we're growing something besides gophers. We did get our Xmas lights up, and Barb gave me some grief about the way the lights only covered part of our large bush. I offered to let her improve it, but that would have involved her climbing a ladder, and her acrophobia won out. As it turns out, the local wild animals thought I should have decorated the lawn instead, so here's what they did. Neighbors have been kind and not commented.

I'm getting solar panels on the house, just as they're thinking about taking away the incentives that induced me to put 'em up in the first place. It turns out that the portions of the roof that get the most sunlight aren't the right shape to accommodate the panels, so a bunch of them are on the garage, and at an angle that only gets sun a couple of hours a day. And battery systems are having the same supply issues as computer chips, so hope the battery actually works once it's online. The installers are having a devil of a time adding all the conduits, controllers and other foofaraw required to fit the system to the house, once again upsetting my best laid plans to get this letter out. It'll be interesting to see what the new federal legislation will include to encourage home solar, and what they'll tax to pay for it. Who knows, maybe I just paid an amount equivalent to my annual salary a few years ago for roof decorations. But when DWP shuts off our power, I'll be able to keep the refrigerator running.

Cats are fine – George is now the oldest kitty we've ever had at 16, and Gracie is getting more territorial, as more neighborhood cats, coyotes, skunks, and gophers pop in and need to be shooed away. Just hope she doesn't get skunked, or eaten. Barb can tell you about our dodging-COVID adventures.

BARB: After being locked down in CA for a year we were ready to travel. Due to COVID, we couldn't take our Baltic cruise for the second year in a row, so we decided to float down an American river and learn our own history for a change. We took a Mississippi cruise that started in New Orleans and ended in Memphis. Of course, we had to jump through a few COVID hoops before we were allowed on the ship. Two COVID tests seemed a little excessive to me but at least we got out of California. We spent an extra day in New Orleans and got a guided tour that included an above ground cemetery and a trip to where the levee containing Lake Pontchartrain gave way and flooded the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. They've been rebuilding frantically ever since. The airport was new, a river walk mall was built, but the Quarter remains the same. And we know because we walked most of it trying to find a cup of coffee and a beignet. You can find three bars on every street, but we found only three Cafés du Monde—and they all had lines around the block. I finally got a beignet at a Café du Monde in a huge city park when we took our tour, so I didn't feel cheated. Then we boarded the American Countess (steamboat) and took off. We saw swamps and alligators and sugar cane fields. And we got LOTS of American

history. We toured Vicksburg National Cemetery in Mississippi. We saw restored ironclads and got an education about Grant's tactics. We rode bikes and toured mansions in Natchez. We got Civil War history and drank mint juleps (well, I did) at every stop. I'd never spent any time in the South, but I found it to be lovely. And I liked the luxurious accommodations of our paddlewheel boat. We had a private balcony that came in handy when people annoyed me—which happened with some regularity. The cruise company put us at the same seats every evening after the first dinner. And we got stuck with a clinker. He made dinner a trial until we all ignored him. The cruise was also understaffed and had to follow bizarre CDC requirements for serving (which changed daily) so we endured some memorable waits and screw-ups. I went through the Battle of the Butter nightly (why couldn't I get butter? Was there a shortage? And what was the deal with buns? And who do I have to bribe to get a glass of wine?). The entertainment was good especially when I discovered the girl singer was an alum of the same summer stock company I worked with. I asked if her generation drank Ripple or Boone's Farm and she replied she didn't drink either; she'd been underage. I said, "So was I" and all of us old folks snickered knowingly. We weren't as respectful of rules as kids today. But all was forgotten when I sat on my balcony and watched the Mississippi float by in the moonlight. I felt like Huck Finn. We left the Countess in Memphis where we saw Graceland, the Civil Rights Museum, and Beale Street on our own. It was good to be just the two of us again, not herded around with the other cattle. I'm also glad we went in May. I'm told summer is an unbearable festival of heat and bugs in the South.

We went to a Sullivan (my side) family reunion in South Dakota last July. It was nothing like the reunions of my youth. There were no drunken brawls or broken furniture. The venues were all nice, but I was a little put off at the Madison Country Club when I had to ask for a wine glass to go with my single-serving bottle. The bartender gave me a dirty look. I guess she expected me to swig it down like beer. A cousin gave a lecture on the family history, there was a golf tournament, and two banquets. I got caught up with people I hadn't seen in years. We fondly reminisced about the fistfights of our elders that were the entertainment when we were kids, but we all agreed it was more fun watching the fights than being involved in them. The drunks are all gone so there was less excitement but more enjoyment. And I didn't feel I had to protect Gordon. We took advantage of our SoDak time to see if I'd enjoy living on a lake, so Gordon rented a lake condo. The lake was green. And icky. I didn't see anyone swimming although there were lots of boats out—and I hate noise, so lake-living is out. If we get a place in SoDak it'll probably be on a river. I can always find an indoor pool if I want to swim. Gittin' too old to swim in glop. We took our usual tombstone tour and connected with old friends when we stayed at the Hotel on Phillips in Sioux Falls. Nice week.

We went to another family reunion/wedding (Gordon's side this time) in Maryland last September. We stayed in Gaithersburg and based our operations from there. We finally got into James Madison's house and stood in the room where he wrote the Bill of Rights. That was humbling. We balanced our Vicksburg Cemetery tour with a tour of Gettysburg National Cemetery. We inspected Annapolis. I wanted to go back to Clyde's in Georgetown for crab cakes, but Gordon didn't want to drive into the DC area (don't blame him). He went online and found a Clyde's in the town next to us. The surroundings at this Clyde's were even better than the Georgetown one and the food was just as good, so it was a lucky find. The wedding was charming, the couple were happy, and Gordon learned a lot of his family history. It was a good trip.

Other than the trips, life has been quiet. The symphony is back in business, so Gordon got me my Boat seats. I think they're the best seats in the house so, apparently, we have arrived. Theaters are reopening, life is returning to normal. I don't think I'll take this stuff for granted ever again. Ahh, who am I kidding. I'm already forgetting the Great Lockdown--one of the few advantages to losing my marbles. Have a Happy and a Merry, etc.

Barb + Gordon