

April 17, 2000

Dear Family and Friends,

Those of you (most of you) who have gotten a Tax Day letter before will remember it's my humble attempt to lighten an often less than pleasant aspect of modern life. Those of you who have forgotten about this note (or for whom this is a new and strange experience) should now be less confused about what this is and why it's arrived now. And the cleverest among you will realize that I've just given up on getting a Christmas letter out within a month of Christmas.

But the timing works out well because I just had an interesting experience: I got the lawn mower out for the spring and fully expected it not to start – I know I should be using an electric and when this one finally dies, I'll revisit the idea, but it was cheap and seems to work fine and I promise not to mow the lawn any more than absolutely necessary so as not to add too much to our current air pollution problem. But I digress. True to form I yanked on the starter cord a couple dozen times before admitting that it really wasn't just about to catch. I then checked the gas and oil levels. OK, that's not true I was smart enough to check that after the first half dozen attempts.

The only other thing I thought to check was the spark plug; it was pretty well oil fouled. So I cleaned it up, filed it down a bit and then decided I should reset the gap (I didn't maintain an air-cooled VW for 10 years for nothing). Of course, I couldn't find the owner's manual. With my current interest in things on-line I decided, on a whim, to see if Briggs and Stratton (the makers of my lawn mower's engine) had a web site that might mention such minutia. Sure enough they do (www.briggsandstratton.com) and within that web site is a page (www.briggsandstratton.com/service/other.html) with the correct spark plug gap for my mower (0.03 inches).

That is an incredibly long winded way to get around to the point that the new job I took with AARP, with the web development unit, may not have been too bad an idea. If the web has invaded backyards to the point of providing lawn mower tuning tips it may be something which will stay around for a while.

Unfortunately (or perhaps not) Sarah missed this long grass inspired epiphany as she was at the Association of American Geographers conference. Yes, last year I did tag along but she informed that I was not the only spouse in attendance in Hawaii who didn't make the trip to Pittsburg this year. She says it was a good conference and her paper was well received as was Janek's (who we hope to see graduated this year). She has enjoyed being Chair of the speciality group on geographic research on aging, but also was not thrilled to travel back in time to when she had academic papers to write.

Sarah didn't take a new job this last year but after some trying times at AARP, she did look around and was offered a position with the American Society of Travel Agents. Some of the other folks in Research must have heard she was unhappy and she started the new year (note: I didn't say millennium, I've been converted to the

camp that the millennium starts next year) with a nice raise, a bonus and some new agreements on her role with the Research Group.

Between her raise and my new job this time of year has us convinced that we need to move into a house as joint owners with a bank. So we've been nosing around, looking at open houses, talking to neighbors about real estate agents and looking at spreadsheets with lots of zeros in them – thanks Loren. We are pretty well determined to stay in our current neighborhood (we love it here and the value of a built in kitty sitter can't be discounted) and will endeavor not to buy ourselves into house-poordom. We hope to get serious and take the plunge late this summer.

Another reason for looking for a house is to get a bit more space. I'm afraid the new job has gone to my head and I've started empire building at home. We now have a nice little three node 100Mbps network in the spare bedroom, and a DSL connection on order (and due to arrive about the time we move). Those familiar with DSL lines may realize a new home-buying constraint: we need to find a house within 2 – 3 miles of the central office. (For those unfamiliar, DSL is a fast connection to the Internet which won't tie up our phone line – and has the dubious side effect of allowing hackers much greater access to our network; that was one reason for the latest computer purchase, so the old machine could become a firewall.)

Enough with the acronyms! Shortly after last year's Tax Day letter, Sarah and I spent a long weekend in Boston helping celebrate the 70th birthday of Mr. Henry. Not Peter (who's wedding we went to last year) but his father, and a friend of the Zapolsky's since they lived in Silver Springs and he was Dean of Howard University. We also took the opportunity to visit the MIT computer museum while we were there. It was scary to see that an original IBM PC (I promise that's the last acronym) is considered a museum piece now.

We followed that trip with a bit of camping with Ken, Nancy and a small contingent of Carolans (not small Carolans – they don't exist, you're not allowed in the family unless you are over six feet tall; rather a small number of them) on Assateague Island over memorial day.

Continuing the camping, pony theme, we spent some time this summer in Southwest Virginia at Grayson Highlands state park (a Williams family favorite for years). Sarah's introduction was mostly a hit but we managed to be there during the middle of a vicious heat wave that only barely cooled off at night. The wild ponies, however, were as entertaining as ever. We added some





time to that trip to visit with Steve and Helen in their new home (which is really very nice and clearly shows Helen's years of woodworking experience), and finished the trip at the Scottish Highland Games on Grandfather mountain. The caber toss and sheep dogs were high points of the games (as were the crazy runners who see a 26 mile marathon up the side of the

mountain as something fun), and Sarah and I both had a great time visiting with my folks. (More about that trip, if you are interested, on the web:

www.geocities.com/~class_v_soft/jul_99.html.)

We also got a chance to trade visits with Harry. He did his best to show me the highlights of New York in a day (he didn't understand that some people don't grow up



with the Big City in their back yards). We had a great time with the Schackelton Exhibit at the Museum of Natural History and I really enjoyed my first visit to the Cloisters. As always, the concert on City Island was a highlight; one in sharp contrast to seeing the Capitol Steps here in DC.

And, of course we had a chance to enjoy our local outdoors with many trips to the Potomac, one of which included a run down Little Falls where one of the waves in the middle knocked Sarah over and I was just starting to go after her when she rolled up perfectly in control in the middle of the rapid!

The weather over Christmas wasn't quite as nice but Sarah and I enjoyed spending more time with Harry and getting to know Elenore and her son Nick. The Highland Park, NJ house was starting to fill up with all of us there and I think everyone had a great time (even if there was a little bit of stress during the grand cooking of the goose).

And true to form, the weather in Atlanta over New Year's was bit warmer than New Jersey. Decatur did a great job with the festivities: there was enough going on to entertain adults and kids alike.





And Susan's influence showed as more and more people crawled under the table to eat their raisins at the stroke of midnight.

Also of note this year: Joining the jet set when Sarah and I flew up to New York for the naming ceremony of Mark and Michelle's newest addition, Tessa in early October. Tessa joins Natalie (born to Ken and Nancy) and Cassidy (who joined Tom and Emily) in September and the three girls were joined by Marsha and Bob's Benjamin just last month (rumor has it that he likes older women – which should work out well). With all our friends sprouting families we don't feel any pressure (well, not much) to expand our family any time soon – Max and Zip are keeping us quite busy.

However, we do enjoy watching the families grow and were pleasantly surprised when Mark, Michelle, Leah, Justin, Reese and a very small Tessa stopped by last month for an "emergency" visit on their way back from Florida to Long Island. It wasn't an emergency, they just had an extra couple of days and we enjoyed the chance to visit (and convince ourselves again of the need for a bit more space – and the tax benefits that come with it). Which brings us back to today.

For those who might be interested in copies of this (or printing it with a better printer) it can be found at:
www.geocities.com/~class_v_soft/pdf/taxday_2000.pdf



The tree house in Decatur matches Susan's model pretty well (she just didn't model the hammock).



Sally knows how to celebrate the New Year!!!