

Big Bend Journal

Including but not limited to:

*Midland, Balmorhea, Alpine, Terlingua, Big Bend, Terlingua Ghost Town,
McDonald Observatory, Ozona, Sonora, Junction,
South Llano River, and Cooper's BarBQue.*

Canon and Creed Perkins
Mark and Glenda Morrow

1. **DAY ONE, Saturday, June 8, 2013** -- This was the day we met Chandra, Canon, and Creed in Midland.
 - a. The original plan was to meet in Abilene, but Drew pointed out that due to our subsequent travel plans, we might rather meet them in Midland. (Did you know Midland is 45 miles or so closer to Amarillo than Abilene? My West Texas geography is not that great, and I was a little surprised to discover that. (To discover about Midland, not about my lacking in geography – I already knew about that!))
 - b. With excellent planning all around, we arrived at the pre-agreed upon Popeye's Chicken location within 5 minutes of each other. We ordered a big pile of chicken and stuff, and whisked it off to a (closed) Nature Center where I had been told "the flowers are blooming, there are some tables on our grounds under nice shady trees, and you are welcome to bring a lunch to eat there even though the Nature Center building itself will be closed by when you arrive." Well, not much of that turned out to be accurate, except the part about the building being closed when we arrived. But just a short distance away we found something maybe a little better. The table in the "nice shady area" left a little to be desired, but it was transformed into a clean, colorful affair by the portable tablecloth that Nana just happened to bring. But the "plus" was that there was a really cool playground adjacent to the table area which Canon and Creed both enjoyed MUCH more (unfortunately) than lunch.
 - c. So we spent an hour or so there, visiting with Chandra, and watching the boys, but since Creed wasn't feeling tip-top we decided to go ahead and get checked into our nice cool (the playground was "cool," but that was NOT descriptive of the temperature!) hotel. As it so happened (you never know in this new world of internet reservations), the hotel was "cool" in both senses of the word, and Creed revived speedily, and decided that he needed to check out the hotel's indoor swimming pool. So we said goodbye to Mom, and with hugs all around, Chandra headed back to Amarillo for week of Really Important Work (I forgot the details [Nana listened better than I], but she and a few other teachers in Amarillo were invited to help set policy, define curriculum, and otherwise offer their expertise to help the school district there enhance their educational offerings for lower elementary students!).
 - d. Guess what! The indoor swimming pool (see picture pages) had a WARM Jacuzzi (or maybe it was called a spa? I'm not sure.) It had a sign to get OUT of the Jacuzzi (or whatever it was) if the temperature exceeded 104 degrees Fahrenheit, but since there was no thermometer we were not sure how to follow that rule. (There was NO LIFEGUARD, so we were all swimming at risk to life and limb, PLUS that meant there was no one to ask how we were to determine the Jacuzzi temperature.) But perhaps the

most significant thing about this was that the main pool was cold. Let me re-type that as **COLD!** (I think it must have been spring-fed.) So I tried the main pool for a while first, 'cause I knew if I got used to the nice warm Jacuzzi temperature (whatever it was) I'd never talk myself into getting into a cold pool. So I was in the cold pool for probably ten minutes or so before telling myself it was OK to go try the Jacuzzi. When I got to the Jacuzzi I just *stayed* there. (No surprise to any adult reading this, right!) Somehow or the other Canon and Creed went back and forth between the Jacuzzi and the cold pool probably 25 times or so. I don't know how they managed it, but they seemed to think it was great fun. I stayed in the Jacuzzi probably 15 – 20 minutes (well, I'll say "15 minutes" because we found posted rule on the wall later that said no one was to stay in the Jacuzzi for longer than 15 minutes).

- e. Definitely hungry by then, so we all dried off and wandered around Midland looking for food. We found a Rosa's Tortilla Factory (I think that is the official name?) which was a GREAT find, 'cause Canon and Creed were familiar with their menu and LOVED it. We found out that they had seriously out-grown the kid menu there though. They each ordered an item off the kid menu, but ended up eating that much more in addition, PLUS we had to have sopapillas when it was all over of course. That was a real treat. (Two days later, in Big Bend, I commented that my fingers were really sticky, and Canon offered, "You probably never got all that honey cleaned off your hands!")
- f. Seemed like we read a little, watched TV a little, played iPad/iPhone games (you can probably figure out who participated in which activity!), discussed what we would find in the Big Bend, and then headed off to dream land.

2. DAY TWO – Sunday, June 9, 2013 (Midland, Ft. Stockton, Balmorhea, Alpine, Terlingua)

- a. The hotel had a really good (as these things go) free hot breakfast buffet. So we had make-your-own (no lifeguard on duty, remember) waffles, boiled eggs, biscuits and gravy, chocolate milk, white milk, yogurt, sausage, scrambled eggs, and OJ for breakfast. We all got full anyway, I'll grant them that.
- b. On the road again. This time headed to Balmorhea State Park. But before we got 60 seconds from the hotel, what to our wondering eyes should appear but the most monstrous Monster Truck any of us had ever seen! So of course we had to stop and take pictures with real people in the photos to communicate the scale. That was fun. Then back into the car. (Nana's Honda Pilot Touring car, which has so many bells and whistles we STILL haven't figured it all out [you ought to see how thick the paper manuals they gave her are!], but where ONE of the options is the ability to play a DVD movie on the screen for the back seat passengers while they wear wireless headphones and the front seat passengers (adults presumably) can play their classical music (or mostly CCM in our case) or whatever over the car speakers. Pretty cool!)
- c. Arrived at Balmorhea at lunch time. This is a VERY little place. We stopped at what the proprietor told us was the only store/restaurant in Balmorhea to get something for lunch. The only kind of sandwich they were selling was BBQ, so we got four of those to take to the swimming area of the park to eat before we swam (we only had 2.5 hours available in Balmorhea, due to our highly advanced travel itinerary), where we found that Canon and Creed neither one LIKES BBQ sandwiches. Fortunately though, they did like the chips that came with the sandwiches, so they had a potato chip lunch while Nana and I enjoyed the actually-really-good BBQ sandwiches. (Canon also enjoyed his chocolate milk, and Creed his Pepsi – well, about three drinks of it anyway.)

- d. So, throw the trash away and head into the pool area. The pool here IS spring-fed (as opposed to my slightly exaggerated comment earlier about the hotel pool), and it WAS cold! The difference though was that here at the pool we were under the (almost) noon sun, and that made all the difference! Of course I could only compare this swimming area with Barton Springs at Zilker Park in Austin. I'm ready to be proved wrong (I'm sure this info is available on the Internet?), but I think Zilker is colder. It is certainly more "nature like" in my mind. Balmorhea was more "pool-like," though clearly on a HUGE scale. It was somewhere in the area of 25 times the size of the hotel pool, and probably equivalent to 5 or so Olympic-sized pools. (Again, feel free to look up the dimensions and prove me wrong – I'm just giving my guesses here!) I could write and write, but they do have a website you know, so you can go read about it there. It was really fun. I'll leave it at that, and let you look at the pictures we took. (Sadly, Creed never was able to catch one of the fish that were swimming with us!)
- e. So then we headed south to Terlingua, where we were to check into our double-wide (aka, "cabin") no earlier than 4pm. Got groceries in Alpine, which has the closest "real" grocery store to Terlingua (at about 75 miles away!) Got to Terlingua, but the directions to our cabin were vague enough to prevent our finding it. Called the folks renting it out, but no answer. Went all the way through Terlingua, started a U-turn to try looking again, when we noticed one car in the church parking lot. So I pulled in and asked the one person there (a preacher who drives down from near Marfa each Sunday) where Ocotillo Mesa Drive was. He'd never heard of it, but was not really "local," so I followed him over to Margueritte's place. She knows everyone in Terlingua, and seemingly everyone who USED to live in Terlingua. Anyway, she set us on the right track immediately, and the preacher drove all the way up to the other side of Terlingua to show us where the little road to our rental property was. So we finally found our cabin, carried a few things in, and turned around and headed back to the church building. We almost even made it in time for the evening service (6:03pm).
- f. Church service consisted of hearing a DVD telling us about how the Founding Fathers of the USA were active Christians and were not Deists – and how different the situation is today. No one asked me what I thought about using the gathering time for this, so I didn't volunteer my opinion. Canon and Creed were of course bored immediately, but they were GREAT – no griping, just perfect "church kids" who sat there and waited for the DVD to finish. Whereupon the preacher reminded us what we needed to do to be saved, and invited any (of the 10 in the audience, which included us) to come forward who had that or any other need. After the invitation song, a different brother reminded us who were in need of prayer, and asked if we were aware of any others.
 - i. Canon's hand shot up.
 - ii. Brother: Yes young man, what is your prayer request?
 - iii. Canon: I'm going to Houston on June 17 for an appointment, and they are going to take some blood, put me to sleep and stick a long needle into my liver to see how it is doing. And it's kind of scary to think about.
 - iv. Brother: We will certainly put your request on our prayer list. What is your name?
 - v. Canon: Andrew.
 - vi. Then the brother lead a prayer for the 8 or so people on their prayer list, including Canon (well, Andrew), his mom and dad, and his brother.

- vii. We stood around for 10-15 minutes afterward visiting. All of them were VERY friendly, and tons of info to tell us about Big Bend and the Terlingua area (some of which we actually remembered), and told us how glad they were that we were able to come that evening.
- viii. It was a good experience.
- g. We ate at the CHILI PEPPER CAFÉ after church services. Where the curtains were made out of aluminum flip-tops from soda cans. And the windows were open so the evaporative cooler (which was not that cool) had a circulation path – and the flies in the neighborhood seemed to know about the open window policy. I had a hamburger and French fries which were really good. N, C, and C had Mexican food of various varieties. It was all actually quite tasty.

3. DAY THREE – Big Bend National Park, Monday, June 10, 2013 (Many Famous Birthday’s on this day.)

- a. Obligatory group photographs at the “you are entering the Big Bend National Park” sign.
- b. Continue to Chisos Mountain Basin visitor center. Get suggestions on which hikes to go on.
 - i. Went on .3 mile “Window View” hike. Pretty easy. We saw the “window,” the area where the two mountains in the picture below come together.



There is a stream that goes to that point and then falls 200 feet onto the desert floor. Beautiful. Now we are ready for something tougher.

- ii. Went on 3.6 mile version of the Window Trail hike, where we would actually go to the actual point at the top of the waterfall (when there is water, which there is not in June) where it actually falls into the desert below. We left at 11:20. We hiked, and hiked, and hiked. Had water breaks every 20-30 minutes. Had a long lunch break. Then hiked, and hiked, and hiked. Creed is ready to turn around, but we rest some more and he changes his mind. So we hike some more, and then some more, and then some more. It’s after 1pm by now. I’m thinking maybe we should turn around. (See, we’d been going DOWN hill the whole time and that means, if you haven’t figured it out, that the RETURN trip is – you guessed it – 100% UP hill!) But I don’t have to say anything because Creed decides that he

really DOES want to turn around now. So none of us gives him any argument. Even though I know (well, “have a strong hunch” would be more accurate) that we are within 15 minutes of the actual point at the top of the waterfall, but then I remember the “false peak” syndrome that all true mountaineers (which I am not) know about, but which I only learned of a few years earlier when my sweet wife took me to Enchanted Rock. (We never did make The Peak there, by the way.) So we turned around. This time, we took water breaks every 5 to 10 minutes. We reach our half-out-of-water point. We all had 2 or 3 water bottles/jugs. We take shade breaks wherever we find shade. We even sometimes have to take rest breaks where there IS no shade. We just sit down in the dirt, doing our best to avoid cactus. We brave adults encourage the two absolute troopers (but very tired troopers) to continued effort. We eat cherries. We eat oranges. (Have you ever eaten an orange when you were really too tired to stand up, but knew if you sat down you’d probably not GET up? Wow, that adds SO MUCH to the flavor!) We wonder about mountain lions. Well, I could go on-and-on – and we DID go on-and-on, and finally made it. For some reason, the advertised 2.5 hour trail has taken us almost 4 hours. (Hmmm, well, we did have a peanut-butter sandwich break along the way.) What an experience! We were so impressed with Canon and Creed. They kind of took turns being down, then up, then down, etc. But it just blew me away to see Canon, who 5 minutes before was sitting down in the hot trail, leaping ahead of us and running (yes, Running!) up the stairs. Where kids call up energy at these kinds of moments is beyond me. But both of them were GREAT and we had a great time, even though we didn’t make it all the way to The Window.



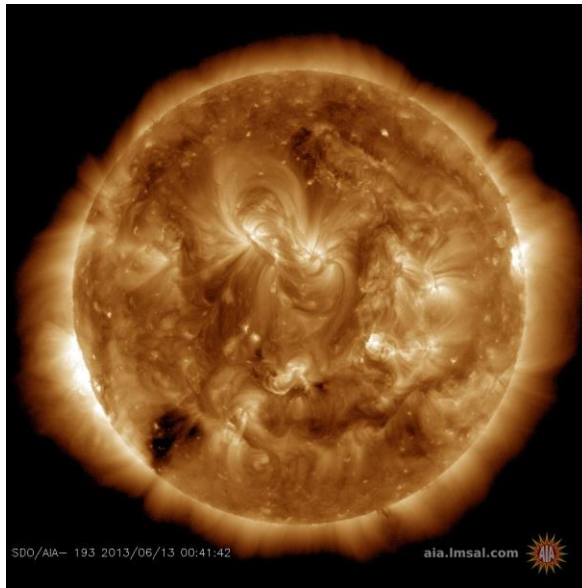
4. **DAY FOUR, Tuesday, June 11, 2013** – McDonald Observatory, and the 6-hour drive to Junction and the South Llano River.

a. **McDonald Observatory**

- i. Wow, we were impressed, to say the least. I had never been, while Glenda had almost been once. (Ask her for the story sometime!)
- ii. Highest paved road in Texas. 6791 feet elevation, if I remember correctly.
- iii. Have you ever SEEN a 107" DIAMETER optical telescope, up close and personal? All 160 tons of it? (The mirror by itself is 4 tons! You did know these monsters use mirrors, not lenses, right?) Head over to our picture pages for 6/11/2013 for some shots.
- iv. And as if that were not impressive enough, they then took us over to look at the TEN METER diameter Hobby-Everyly telescope. This is the telescope that is the core of the Dark Energy Project that you've heard so much about.
- v. To tell the story backwards however, the first thing on our tour was sort of an orientation lecture, but it also included live views of the Sun. The telescope the guide used was a mile or so away, but she had the controls in the theater we were sitting in, so she could scan around the periphery, show us where the current sunspots were, etc. Here are some Sun pictures I just happen to have with me:



1.



2.



3.

b. The Drive

- i. Turns out that the McDonald Observatory is pretty much West of Everything! West of Ozona, West of Sonora, West of West Texas, etc. Whew! Took us 6 hours to drive (most of the time at 80 mph, which was the posted speed limit) over to Junction, which, as you know, is not East Texas by a LONG shot. But Canon and Creed are GREAT travelers. Never ever had any issue at all with some of the long drives. (And they don't even take naps anymore, i.e., constant conversation. We really learned a lot of useful information from them.)
- ii. Stopped and got snacks in Sonora around 530pm, which totally ruined our supper schedule, but we were on vacation, right? In fact, at dinner that night (DQ) I told the boys, "I sure hope we don't get in trouble with your folks for keeping you up so late." Canon said, "What time is it?" I told him, "9:30pm." He said, "Oh, that's fine. We're on Summer Vacation; they're fine with it."

c. **Junction**

- i. So we made it to Junction finally. (I don't remember if I'd ever been to Junction before. Perhaps once when I was the boys' age, or younger, with Grandpa and Grandma?) Followed the map the proprietor of the rental cabin sent us (GPS kind of gave out on the country road we had to follow; it kept telling us, "CAUTION! Entering unverified area! Confirm all suggested routing before proceeding!")
 1. Very cool proprietor. When talking to him on the phone I asked him how we should send a reservation deposit, since the website said they do not take credit cards. He said, "Don't bother with it. Just pay when you get here. Personal check is fine. But if you have to cancel, just give me a call. It's not like we won't have groceries to eat that week if you have an emergency come up and can't be here." Wow, how refreshing! Very different from all the other rental outfits I've ever dealt with, to say the least. When we got here he took us all on his mule first thing down to see the river. First we had to run the goat gauntlet though, but we distracted them by throwing dried corn in strategic places, so we were able to sneak by them.
 2. Well, once we saw the river, the only thing for it was to try it out! So we did. The boys loved it. It belongs to the property owner whose cabin we're staying in, so we had it all to ourselves. Boo-koo (I don't have the foggiest idea how to spell that) shots of the river over on our picture pages, but here are a couple for now from that first evening at the river:



a.



b.



c.



d.

5. DAY SIX – Thursday, June 13, 2013, South Llano River State Park

- a. Got our swim suits on, headed out primed for adventure, when what to our wondering eyes should appear but a HOLE dug across the ONLY road out of the river property, with a backhoe standing guard. They were putting a water line under the road. Went back to the proprietor's house and explained our predicament, whereupon she got on her mule and guided us across a pasture to get around the inoperative road. She Saved the Day!
- b. Made it over to the South Llano River State Park (took about 5 minutes). Same river as flows by the cabin (from yesterday), but about one mile upstream of the cabin.
- c. Boys loved it. Well, we ALL loved it. Stayed at one place on the river about 3 hours, then decided to head back to the cabin, only to see a DIFFERENT part of the river that looked really nice, so we headed back into the river again (still in the state park). An hour or so later we go back to our cabin, rested a little, and went to the "cabin river" again, braving the goat blockade, but taking pictures of the critters this time. Stayed several hours at the river this time. Probably in river a little over 6 hours this day. (As Creed's and my back pictures prove.)
- d. You really do want to check out the pictures this day, with the interceptor goat squad shown surrounding the boys.

6. DAY SEVEN – Friday, June 14, 2013, Return to Civilization (or, in this case, Abilene)

- a. Ate at Coopers Barbeque in Junction, based on recommendations from several personal acquaintances. It was good, but personally I like Rudy's better.
- b. Headed north to Abilene in time to catch a movie before we had to turn the boys back in to the parental units. We saw the EPIC movie, about Good and Evil in the Forest. I enjoyed it; it was well done.
- c. Ate dinner at Rosa's Tortilla Factory in Abilene. Showed some pictures to Drew and Chandra while Canon and Creed provided running commentary.
- d. Decided we were ready to be HOME, so my sweet super-woman wife drove all the way back to Austin and let me sleep on the way. (Anyone who knows me at all knows I am NOT a night person.) We got home about 1215AM Saturday. I got up just before 5AM to start work on getting our trip pictures posted to our website. And now you know the rest of the story!