

Meeker Family Christmas Newsletter - 2014

Merry Christmas!

Dear family and friends,

This has been a year full of amazing things for our family. I can't wait to share it with you. I hope you have had a year of wonder and amazement also and wish you the best this Christmas season! First, we want to welcome three new family members into the fold (yes, we are nuts). First, in March, Coosa (Coosa Classic) became ours for real - we took the leap from leasing into horse ownership and the girls were ecstatic! He is now ours and the girls love him so very much. In June, Cody McMillion (Joy's daughter) became a "mom" to her dog's five puppies - miniature Australian Shepherds. The litter consisted of Indy (a sable merle), "Blackie" (Later Oreo), a black and white, and three tri-colors (Rickie Bobbie, Okie, and Ellie May). After a few weeks of watching these adorable little wigglers, Oreo stole our hearts and came home with us in August. Tango and Snowball were not overly thrilled at first, but he's ingrained himself into their hearts now, too. Joy kept little Ellie May, and friends the Fraylicks' now have Okie and the Lucas' have Rickie Bobbie. Indy went with the sister of a barn buddy to college, so we don't see him often, but we hear updates. The other brothers and sister see each other regularly and love growing up as "barn dogs." Oreo is very athletic and smart - he'll keep us on our toes! The third new member joined us in October - Pepper (Wizard's Peppy Jac) is a new horse, trained in reining, that we are leasing. Pepper is a bit more advanced, and right now, considered Piper's horse (Coosa being Amber's). Piper loved this bay quarter horse's name most of all - she said "Piper and Pepper - that's perfect!"



Last year, we celebrated Christmas with family and friends through our traditional gatherings. Christmas season is always so packed with things to do - church choirs put us in a happy mood, services remind us of the reason for the season, end of the year parties bring together friends in fellowship and fun, and Christmas brings together family for love, fellowship, food and presents. Viewing the Christmas lights, decorating the trees, and seeing the joy and excitement all around us makes the Christmas season, despite its busyness, one of my favorite times of the year.



This year, I had the honor of introducing Hammond School to an international initiative called "An Hour of Code." This was meant to introduce kids to the world of computer science through problem solving and coding (some drag and drop, some games with problems, and some typing in code). Wonderful volunteers from Intel came and talked to the kids about their work and it was so much fun! I've continued to work with my middle school computer club and have found out that the high school has introduced a programming course this year. Also, 5th grade science is having fun by programming robots and the lower school is learning computer science concepts in their digital media time slot. I'm so happy about this!



I also had the privilege of chairing the Carolina's Women in Computing Conference in Charleston and attended / spoke at two other conferences this past spring. I took a group of college students on a Maymester study of RFID technology and how it is used at Walt Disney World, accompanied by my friend and fellow chaperone, Cindy Body. We went behind the scenes of three of the four parks, spoke





to two Imagineers and an Animal Specialist, and had a great time. Sadly, Lee and the girls couldn't come down to join us for any of the time, so they made me promise them a trip in the near future. All told, a busy time for me.



January and February brought weather that SC has not seen since I was a child - snow. Lots of snow! Snow on three separate occasions that was more than just an inch or two; snow that let us make snowmen/animals and snow that let us out of school to play; snow that didn't affect the roads on one of these falls to the point that we couldn't make it to the barn and see Coosa; snow that let Tango and Snowball play and play and have so much fun! Beautiful snow!



This year, the girls met a huge goal - they achieved their black belts in karate from East West MMA. They had worked so hard and for so long and studied and practiced for the test. I lost count of the number of kicks and punches they did and the sparring was very interesting to watch. Every child going for their belt sparred with every other one - when Amber and Piper were called against each other, the look of their faces was priceless - it was like "we are forbidden to use karate against one another and our Mama will be really upset!" But, Mr. Jerry assured them that they had to do it and off they went. They are so proud to

have made it to this level and Amber hopes to continue. However, starting middle school this year, we had to put these plans on hold until next summer. To commemorate how proud we were of them, Lee and I broke down and purchased iPhones for the two of them. They were shocked and surprised (as Piper esp. had been begging and told on more than one occasion that this would NEVER happen) and I must say, they have loved their phones. They've also been very responsible with them and their usage.



This year, Piper worked very diligently in school, achieving the honor of an invitation to the National Junior Honor Society. We are so very proud of our eldest daughter, who really gets very little help from us with her studying and test preparation. She was also one of a few chosen seventh graders across the nation to participate in the Duke TIPS program - a program that has talented young people take the

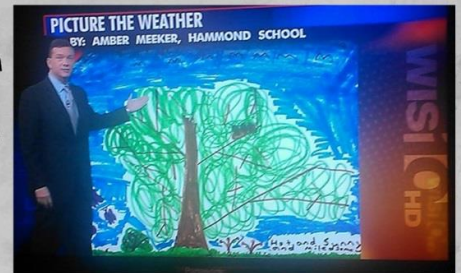


SAT's early, to get a feel for the test. She enjoyed her 3 night, 4 day field trip to Camp Tekoa in NC - taking the plunge into ice cold water early in the morning to wake up and hiking up to the top of a mountain to enjoy the solitude and write in her journal. These trips are so great, not only for the experience, but for the closeness it brings to the class of 2019. (Wow - that doesn't seem nearly as far away as it used to!) Another thing Hammond does is allow the kids to see things "full circle" - when Piper was in first grade, seventh graders came and read stories they wrote for their English class to them; this year, Piper was the seventh grader and read to the first graders! How cool! Piper also completed her sixth year of AWANA and loved joining the youth choir and youth group at our church on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. While doing all of this, she practiced her horsemanship three to five times a week at the barn. It's a busy life for our teenager!



Meanwhile, Amber worked hard in the lower school - she had an amazing trip to Earthshine where she learned so very much (though she did refuse to gut the fish!) She had so much fun on her first three day/two night field trip with her friends and teachers. She also maintained her excellent grades while keeping up with all her fourth grade duties of recycling, flag duty, car pool, and being a great overall example for the younger kids in the lower school. Our little artist also submitted a photo to WIS-TV 10 for a "picture the weather" shot and it was shown during the morning show! At the end of the year, she and her friends did the traditional walk

to the middle school - turning half way to wave good-bye to the lower school and then turning forward to face the next four years in middle school - Hammond starts middle school in 5th grade. Watching our baby leave her "home away from home" of six years brought a lump to our throat, but she handled it with grace and excitement. The famous "reading tree" at Hammond had fallen earlier in the year, so this is the only class picture in 10 years that was not under the tree - but we enjoyed the picnic tables, too! Amber also completed her sixth year of AWANA and enjoyed her children's choir and GA's through the year. She continued to learn and grow in her riding and loves Coosa so very much!





For 2013/2014, Hammond did not have enough students for an IEA team in middle school, just for a SCISA team. So, for IEA competition, Piper and Claire joined their barn friends Hannah Jane, Sarah, Lauren, and Carley on the Central Carolina Equestrian Team (CCET) barn team - they also remained on the Hammond team for SCISA state championship and rode with CCET for IEA. All the kids did so well and the CCET team made it to Nationals and are the current Middle School Reserve Champions of the US for Western horsemanship and reining. We are so proud of these kids and even prouder of the love and respect they have for one another.



The new academic school year in August brought new members Olivia and Maegan for the Hammond middle school team, so Piper and Claire have gone back and will ride with and compete with their friends this year. We've gotten to enjoy these trips to Oklahoma and are looking forward to another trip next summer - go ladies! Already, Piper and Claire have achieved the points necessary for them to attend Zone finals as individuals and their team



also has the team points necessary. It's been an exciting and busy time for all!



As summer started, we were hit with some difficult news - Amber was diagnosed with Scoliosis. The curvature of her spine was fairly severe - 37 degrees and 33 degrees. The x-ray of her backbone looked like a backwards "S." She had to endure a 90 minute MRI, fully inside that machine, with no entertainment, and my heart hurt for my brave little girl, who has always been frightened of loud noises. She was a real trooper, staying very still while all the scans were done. She now has a back brace which she must sleep in each night, but this (hopefully) will help us avoid back surgery. The brace is sometimes painful for her, but she rarely complains. Please keep our little one in your prayers, as she must continue to wear the brace until she stops growing - another five years or so. She hasn't let it slow her down, though - what a little trooper.

Unfortunately, while we were at the doctor, we had Piper checked also and she, too, has Scoliosis, though not as severe as her sister. Hers does twist differently, however, and pushes one of her vertebra into a muscle in her back, so she started physical therapy to help strengthen her back muscles and relieve pain. Since it was helping Piper, Amber also started physical therapy. They have not let it slow them down a bit, though, and hope that the therapy will strengthen their core and help with their riding!



This summer, the girls started learning the art of "Reining." They've been very excited about this for a while (esp. Amber - my little daredevil!) and began lessons with Mrs. Ruth Finley and Mrs. Rebecca Shaw. Reining involves patterns, spinning, speed, skids, and daring - after lessons through the summer, the girls are hooked! They have enjoyed riding new horses - Nick, Dunny, TJ, and Champ - each one progressing in difficulty. Amber's up to TJ and Piper's ridden Champ the last couple of lessons. They really enjoy it and are hoping to keep up the lessons along with their busy schedules!



This summer, my parents, Boyce and Martha, planned a very special trip. For years, they have talked about wanting to take the girls on an adventure - to show them the United States. This year was a sabbatical year for Lee, so the timing seemed perfect. We headed out of SC at the end of June to go and explore. Our first stop was in Oklahoma, to cheer on the Hammond and CCET teams at nationals. We left Oklahoma City to move into Canyon, Texas,



where we explored Palo Duro Canyon. This is the second largest canyon in the United States and it is a sight to behold! We enjoyed a wonderful show about the settlement of TX, complete with fireworks as well as a trail ride through the canyon early the next day (Mama and Daddy opted out of that one!). The girls were disappointed we didn't lope and gallop through the canyon, but that didn't bother Lee and I one bit (ha, ha!).

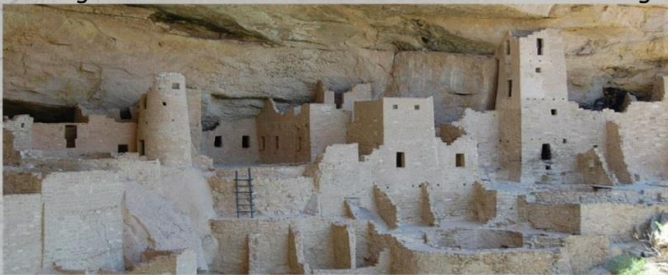




Palo Duro Canyon



After our trail ride, we began the journey to Colorado to visit Mesa Verde National park. This place of wonder has preserved the cliff house dwellings of the past. We explored the kivas and hiked the trails, as well as enjoyed the museum. Amber found out about the "Junior Ranger" program of our National Parks and did the work and took the test to get her first of what would grow to be six badges! (One for each park we visited.) We stayed in the park in little cabins and I personally discovered how severely out of shape I am - especially at high elevations! Seeing these structures was a wonderful and amazing experience.



The Kivas were cool - loved going into one!



We left Mesa Verde and drove through the famous "Four Corners" where we had to stop and get our photos in four states at once! Then, we drove into Arizona to visit the Grand Canyon. Lee nor I had ever been, and I can't describe the feeling of seeing it emerge before us on the trail. At first, you can't take it in - it's just too awesome! It looks like a photograph - something like that can't be real! Then, as you sit and stare and marvel at the wonder - you are filled with amazement and sheer awe at the power of God and His creation. We didn't have time to go down the furthest trail, but we did get to explore for several hours. Amber got her second Junior Ranger badge and we struck out for California.





**MONTEREY BAY
AQUARIUM**



Our first stop in California was Monterey. The beauty of the Bay and the plentiful number of sea lions fascinated the girls. We ate at Fisherman's Wharf while we watched these animals - so cumbersome on land and so agile in the water. It was a bit chilly on the water. We South Carolinians are used to temperatures of 90-100 degrees in July! We also toured the Monterey Bay Aquarium while we were there - it's so beautiful! My favorite fish, the sunfish, is in the giant tank. When I visited in the mid 1990's, they had their first sunfish. I asked about "him" and apparently he OUTGREW the biggest tank ever created to that point and they had to helicopter him into the bay for release! They also had sea otters, sharks, jellies, and octopi to view and enjoy. It was hard to tear ourselves away, but we wanted to make it to Silicon Valley and tour the Computer History Museum that same day. So, we headed north toward San Francisco and stopped in Palo Alto. It was so exciting to see my girls get to try their hands at creating a punch card, hear the talks, and explore the museum - allowing us to see all the things I've taught my classes about for years! I have already incorporated some of the material into my lectures. I wish I'd had more time and look forward to a return trip.



We made it on in to San Francisco that evening, stopping at the famous "In and Out Burger" for supper. I loved the Bible verses on the cups and wrappers. It's so nice when Christian business owners share their faith. Simple menu and delicious food - wish we had one around here! The next day, we explored Muir Woods (and Amber achieved her third Junior Ranger Badge). Once again, the awesomeness of God's creation hits, as you view the giant red woods and sequoias. One tree had even survived a fire, which made a cavern in the trunk large enough to get inside. From the delightful little chipmunks (on the lookout for a handout) to the beautiful ferns and peaceful paths through the giant trees, this is an experience not to be missed. We left Muir Woods and took a tour of the Bay, leaving Fisherman's Wharf to circle the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges before returning. We saw Alcatraz but didn't stop there, opting instead to head for the shopping experience at Pier 39. There is every store imaginable there! The bread bowl of chili was very satisfying and we loved exploring all the stores. We drove down Lombard Street and headed back to our hotel (which the girls loved - there were streams filled with Koi fish in the lobby where we ate breakfast).



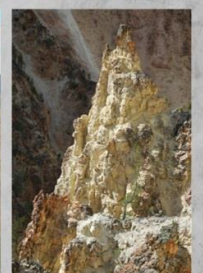


Next on the agenda was wine country, so we visited Sonoma (in Sonoma Valley) and toured the Sabastiani Winery. Even though we are not really wine drinkers, it was fascinating to learn how the grapes are grown and cultivated and how the wine is made from them. The winery was beautiful and the detailed décor

was amazing. One wall was a mural of Sonoma that was hand painted by the original owner of the winery. The wine casks also had exquisite carvings on them, all having to do with wine in some way. The details were amazing. It was also interesting for me to see all the various products that come from wine or go with wine. We especially enjoyed the chocolate! The purses made from cork were just beautiful.



From Sonoma, we headed to Yellowstone, where we stayed just outside of the park entrance. Watching Old Faithful erupt was just incredible. Amber earned her fourth Junior Ranger badge and we enjoyed the trails and beauty of the park. Everyone knows how much I love wildlife (and my children share this passion) so seeing the bison, elk, and moose were real treats! I was hoping to see wolves or bears (from a distance) and when we didn't see them IN the park, we visited the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center across from our hotel that evening. These were rescued wolves and grizzly's that were no longer "safe" to leave in the wild - mostly because they became too accustomed to people and could prove to be dangerous. The size of the grizzlies really gives one an appreciation of their power. It was wonderful to get to see them safely and know that conservationists are looking out for these beautiful and powerful animals. It was also interesting to learn their "stories" - how they came to be in the rescue center.



From Yellowstone, we headed through the Dakota's to see the Battle of Little Bighorn. Amber's fourth grade project was based around "Comanche" the sole American survivor of Custer's Last Stand - a horse! We found a post card that featured Comanche and just had to get several copies! Amber earned her 5th Junior Ranger badge here. Then, we headed toward Crazy Horse and Mount Rushmore. Crazy Horse, while not complete, was fascinating, as it allows a peek into the mind of the sculptor that can visualize creating something like this out of a mountain! They take only donations, no government funding, so the project goes a bit more slowly, but seeing the photos of the progress and witnessing what has been done and what is envisioned was fascinating. Then, we headed toward Mount Rushmore and got to meet one of the original blasters - a gentleman was there autographing books about his part in the creation of this masterpiece of sculpture. Amber got her sixth (and final for the trip) Junior Ranger badge. We enjoyed some delicious ice cream, based on the recipe of President Jefferson and then began the long journey home. We had one last stop - the Corn Palace! There, we enjoyed corn in every shape, size, and type (the popcorn that was sweetened was DELICIOUS!). The murals that were created just from corn and corn husks were beautiful. It was really interesting to see this tribute to corn - every child's favorite vegetable!



We returned home to two ecstatic puppy dogs and a "where have you been" horse. Amber more than met her goal of the trip - to get as many Junior Ranger Badges as possible as well as see as many types of cactus as she could! The girls then headed for the beach with Mama, Daddy, Aunt Nell, and Kim; Lee and I were left to our own devices for a week. Just before they left, we told them about the decision to bring Oreo into the family - they were so excited! He was too young to bring home; he came home just as school started. Then, the girls headed to the beach with family - this was the first week we've had in a LONG TIME where we were both not working and had no children to watch after. It was so wonderful just to spend time with each other. Lee even took a horseback riding



lesson! Then, we packed up Tango and Snowball and headed to the beach ourselves for about half a week. We had a relaxing time with family, enjoying the lapping of the ocean waves with our two boys sitting beside us on the sand. There were a couple of windy days, but in general, we had good weather.





We left the beach to drop off the puppies and head to the mountains of NC with our friends the Schellings and Elaina. Memory Mountain Lodge is so peaceful. We love everything about it - the comradery of being with long-time friends, the camp



fires and ghost stories, hiking the waterfalls, SweatTreats ice cream, and Highland's shopping (we have to go by Colonel Mustard's for the special jelly every year)! Memory Mountain Lodge is definitely the place to make lovely memories!



Just before Lee returned to work from his sabbatical we fulfilled my promise to the girls - we took a trip down to Florida to visit Disney World. I have to say, August is not my favorite time to go - it's very hot and crowded and the cast members are a little less likely to help you if you are hoping for a special favor - but it was Disney! This was Amber's first trip as a "Disney Adult" (age 10) - so she got to put her finger on the ticket acceptor and got the adult desserts for the first time! She was SO EXCITED! I'd gotten to arrange two experiences for the girls that they loved - meeting an Imagineer and an Animal Specialist. Amber dreams of being an Imagineer one day and designing all the attractions; Piper longs to work with animals and loved hearing what that's like at Disney and the path one might take if working there is an end goal. Lee and I are all for it - we'd love it if they worked there one day! We also enjoyed Disney's "Frozen Summer" celebration, having photos with Olaf, Anna, Elsa, and trying our hand at ice skating! (Ok - everyone but me - I know my limits!) But to ice skate and play in snow in August in Florida - not something everyone can claim to have done!



We can't say that our whirlwind summer was "restful" but it was the experience of a lifetime. We were so blessed with Mama and Daddy giving us the Western trip - a once in a lifetime experience. So many people explore the globe. I truly believe that we really should start by exploring "home" - there are so many wonders here in the United States that we don't appreciate. We hope to travel more in the future - there's so much we want to see and so much we want to repeat!



The fall brought a return from our trips and a start of middle school - the first time in 10 years we haven't been in the lower school at Hammond. Amber LOVES it- and is learning so much responsibility - changing classes, having a locker, LOTS of homework, and her most favorite part, full custody of her iPad, which she can now bring home from school. She's very excited to have Mrs. Roberts as her homeroom teacher - the same teacher Piper had - and is really enjoying middle school with her, Mrs. Priester, Mrs. Symanski, and learning the flute with Mrs. Graham. She rides Coosa after school and received a second place in the Spooktacular horse show in October and Coosa got 6th place for his Halloween costume - he was a (little grumpy) carousel horse. Amber has joined my middle school computer club and has also joined a Lego league club after school - she uses Lego Mindstorms to build programmable robots with her team. They began competition with other schools in November and won the project award their first time out! Our very busy 5th grader also joined band this year, learning to play the flute, getting up early on Wednesday's to join Chorus 65 (and sing at the Holiday Market this year!) and performing in the Veterans Day Band Concert. She's doing wonderfully and we are so very proud of her!



Piper started her last year of middle school with grace and excitement - she's taking four high school level classes! It's a tough schedule, but she's up for it. She continued with my computer club, where this year the emphasis is on programming. The kids are learning the Python programming language and it's going very well. It's so gratifying to see their excited faces, week after week. Piper also continues to go horseback riding for the team and for enjoyment.

Earlier this year, Mama and Daddy (Boyce and Martha) had decided they would like to move closer to us, so they put their house on the market. With the awesome help of Rusty Johnson (Keller Williams Realty), they sold their home in September, found a new home close to ours, and put in a contract. As usual, there was a "domino" of everyone needing to close for everything to work, but they were so excited! Packing was no fun, nor was leaving wonderful friends and a home for the last 29 years, but they were very excited to move closer to the girls and to us. We are so happy to have them near. October was exhausting, they soon had the boxes emptied and it looked like home!



Trick or Treating was fun this year - we had many of our barn friends come over to spend the night - for the first time, the girls got to visit their grandparents home to get candy and everyone came back happy. The next morning, we were greeted with an unprecedented sight on November 1st in SC - SNOW. Not sure what this will mean for our winter, but it made everyone getting home a little more interesting! We were to leave for a horse show in GA that day, after getting everyone home - it was too warm to stick at our house, but many within 15 miles really got enough to enjoy. The horse show went well, with teammate Maegan showing IEA for the first time. We showed at the location of the Olympic games back in 1996 - a beautiful facility! It was so much fun to visit. Beside the horse show, there was an alpaca show - what





cute little animals! Tried to talk Joy into one for the barn, but she said "no way!" This show and the IEA show in Camden in November brought the team all the points it needs for Zone finals and Piper and Claire also have their individual points. Looking forward to the finals in March!



November brought the once-in-a-lifetime event for every 5th grader at Hammond - Early Technology Week. This week is an amazing outdoor adventure where the 5th graders are transported back in time to learn how Native Americans, Aborigines, and other ancient peoples survived. They learned about early tools and weapons, how to skin a deer with just a rock's sharp edge (and how EVERY part of the deer was used - nothing wasted - to honor the animal); how to create rope from grasses and bark, and then use that rope to create bags and belts; how to carve gourds into useful baskets to carry things (and make them beautiful); how to create paint from soil, chalk, egg yolks, and water; and how to create a flute from river cane. Mr. Manke really does it right! He and five other naturalists from all over the east coast teach these kids classes over the week - so from 8:30am to 2:45pm, these kids are out in the elements (it was really cold this year - they also got to watch the creation of many fires from sticks and friction) and had their hands using bones, twine, rocks, etc. to accomplish their goals. The items they came home with were just beautiful, but the experience - there's nothing like it. Thank you so much, Mr. Manke and Hammond School - for making this possible.

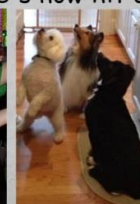


This Thanksgiving brought my first attempt at my "Ginggonna's" dressing - not too bad for a first attempt, but not quite like hers yet! We had a nice, relaxing day with Mama, Daddy, and Mom joining us. Tango, Snowball, and Oreo enjoyed begging for leftover turkey and we all shared a fun time. Mitchell's Photography's annual "Santa" pictures complete our year! This is our 11th year with what the girls call "the real Santa" and Piper was thrilled that, while she's now hit 5'8". Santa is STILL taller than she is!



To summarize the year, we had an amazing time with family, friends, and each other. We saw the beauty of our country, explored the ways of the past and took a peek into the future! We wish you all a very **Merry Christmas** and hope you have a great 2015!

Love,



Lee, Paige, Piper, Amber, Tango, Snowball, Oreo, Coosa, and Pepper