

*Monday, June 25, 2001*

*We arrived safely at the ballpark in Phoenix after a rough start, but our mood changed after the Arizona Diamondbacks showed us on the scoreboard during the game!*

The weather report for Phoenix indicated temperatures were expected to rise above 100°F our first day on the road. Not entirely accustomed to driving a motorhome full of perishable food and full-coated dogs, I decided to leave Redlands as soon as Kris arrived from the airport just after midnight.

Several packs of cinnamon gum, a few music cassettes, and the pattering feet of wandering pets would soon distract us from the pungent smell of cleaning solutions and static-filled privacy curtains that dangled next to the windows.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Galaxies of stars spotted the sky. The man on the moon had even taken that moment to hide behind the mountains for a few minutes of sleep. We were the only sound in the neighborhood as we packed last minute essentials, grabbed the suntan lotion, and led our three dogs into our temporary home for the next sixty days.

With everyone settled in, I turned the key. The engine gave no response. Appropriately too late for any corrective action, I had remembered I had a problem turning the key during our test drive several weeks prior, but conveniently forgot to look into the problem. I tried to start the motorhome again; each turn forced the key deeper into my index finger until the impression finally broke the skin.



The neighborhood was not quiet anymore; echoes of muffled anger and a few choice words found their way outside the motorhome. Kris gave a noble effort as well, but after ten minutes of struggling to start our journey, we called for help.

I made a few frantic calls to AAA, who promptly took my information and told me no one would come out until nine o'clock. "It's the middle of the night, after all," the operator pointed out. I sat in the RV and questioned the worthiness of emergency roadside membership if the emergencies needed to happen between 9 and 5. The dogs didn't have an answer for me, though they did seem to genuinely care through their tired excitement.

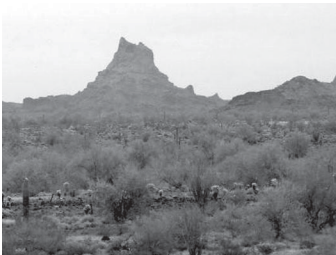
It approached three o'clock. AAA was at least six hours away from even investigating the problem. Kris remained patient - with me, mainly - and

even though she encouraged me to sleep a few hours while we waited, she soon handed me the phonebook open to the locksmiths. I found a locksmith that offered 24-hour assistance, explained the problem, and asked if it would be a painless fix. After a contagious and optimistic yawn, he agreed to take a look.

In the hour it took to arrive at our home, both Kris and I fell in and out of sleep as passing cars rattled the motorhome's open screen door. The locksmith arrived, spent forty minutes under the dashboard with an assortment of tools, and fixed the problem. (I don't pretend to understand how he fixed it, but I was pretty sure it only involved a small wrench, hammer, and a bill for \$100.)

The stars had long disappeared by the time the motorhome started six hours after we originally planned. With one last kick, we were finally on the road. We waved goodbye to our home, the neighborhood, and the city where we lived, knowing upon our return we would view life with different eyes.

The trip to Phoenix along Interstate 10 was long and tiresome, but the scenery was wonderful. Overcast skies shielded us from the desert sun and kept us from overheating in the middle of nowhere, yet offered dramatic views of the desert landscape. I had assumed deserts were flat, barren places. Here were endless mounds of dirt sprinkled with blooming yellow flowers, rampant brush, and tall cacti frequent in photographs of the American Southwest.



We frequently stopped at truck stops and rest areas to nap, walk the dogs, and snack on whatever seemed appealing from our plentiful food cabinets. While we averaged 5.5 miles per gallon today, lower than expected, we only had to stop for gas once before we reached camp.

We stayed at a KOA campground one hour north of Phoenix in a town called Black Canyon City. The campground had a silver rating, one level shy of the organization's highest rating, gold, and for my first experience in a genuine campground, I was impressed. It was quiet, clean, and offered dozens of spaces for campers of all lengths and requirements.

I pulled the motorhome into space fourteen, a small stretch of gravel surrounded by mature aloe plants and varying species of cacti. Young children splashed in the pool a few yards from the main office as I attached

the RV to the campground's electrical box hidden in the landscaping.

While other travelers picnicked at nearby tables, Kris and I disappeared into the motorhome, hoping to catch a few hours sleep before tonight's baseball game. The air conditioner dealt with the region's high humidity; its steady hum lulled us into the first substantive sleep we had in thirty-two hours.

The alarm clock sounded much too soon for our liking, but anticipation of visiting the ballpark gave us the willpower needed to roll out of bed and drive back to Phoenix. It had just turned five o'clock; downtown businesses had closed, and like a scene from New York City, employees rushed toward nearby parking lots and garages wearing dark suits, dresses, and bright white tennis shoes.

I parked the motorhome next to an empty row of meters a few blocks from the ballpark, skeptical that we had missed a no parking sign. We stood on the sidewalk with our tourist badges on until light rain covered our eyeglasses, waiting either for traffic officers to write us a ticket or other daring downtown visitors to confirm the valid space to park. Pretty soon we were joined by other fans who nonchalantly nodded to us before locking their car doors and walking toward the ballpark. Metered parking was free after 5 P.M.

I was a little uneasy about leaving the dogs in the motorhome. Sure, it was big enough, and enough air would circulate through the screen windows, but what about things I couldn't control, like people trying to break in, or rock the motorhome, or vandalize it? Kris did her best to quell my doubts; after another round of goodbye pats on the head and scratches behind the ears, we put the dogs in their crates, opened the windows to let air pass through the screens, and walked toward Bank One Ballpark. I only looked back twice.



The walk through downtown Phoenix included a very charming view of ornate designs situated on rounded, artsy buildings. We followed Jefferson Street to the ballpark where local entrepreneurs pushed bottled water and peanuts. We passed by the first seller, but couldn't resist the second who offered us two waters for the price of one. It was a warm night, around 85 degrees, the light rain holding off long enough for us to reach the stadium turnstiles.

Bank One Ballpark (a.k.a. BOB) was home to the Arizona Diamondbacks, an expansion team that joined the National League in 1998. (The team got its name from the diamondback rattlesnake, which was among the most common reptiles found in Arizona.) The Diamondbacks were the first expansion team to reach the playoffs in their sophomore year, which was quite a feat considering they started with a roster full of players voluntarily given up by other teams. Even though the team lost to the New York Mets in Game Four of the National League Division Series that year, they had been considered a threat to visit the post-season each year since.

BOB was located in the warehouse district of downtown Phoenix, an area that grew out of the middle of a questionable neighborhood in the mid-1990s. The structure blended into the surroundings so well that when we approached the ballpark from Jefferson Street, it gave the impression that we would be entering something more akin to an ice arena than a baseball stadium. It looked very rectangular, but like the other downtown buildings, had an elegant combination of red brick and green, exposed steel that gave it an appealing appearance.



Upon entering the ballpark, a series of escalators immediately to our right escorted us to the upper level. We emerged near section 330, the left field corner of the stadium. We heard the familiar thump of baseballs hitting the outfield wall as the Diamondbacks finished their batting practice. Pre-game music from the sound system energized the players; its booming bass beats echoed through the hallways, grabbing hold of us and pulling us in closer and closer, one fast-paced step at a time. A few more feet and we would see what the commotion was all about. I tried my best to keep Kris with me, but anxiety thwarted me steps ahead like a young boy at the zoo. Then it revealed itself.

Neither of us had been inside a domed (or roofed) stadium before. So when Kris and I stood at the base of the upper level overlooking this magnificent cathedral, we were speechless. It was as though we were on top of the world, taking in all that was the new era of baseball in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was hard to believe that below us sat a full-sized professional baseball field, and those ant-sized men running around in uniforms were whom we came to watch. What an odd feeling to see a game we held larger than life completely enclosed and air-conditioned. The lights, the sounds, the smells, the familiar play... all captured beautifully and encapsulated into its own city that was Bank One Ballpark.

Another baseball shot from home plate like a rocket and landed into the swimming pool beyond the right field wall. A handful of fans, already in their swimsuits, dove in and competed for it. One victorious hand surfaced, gripping the wet baseball in celebration. This was like no other place on earth.

As we walked around the ballpark to locate our seats, it was evident that great care went into keeping the place clean and fan-friendly. The corridors were very wide and could accommodate the throngs of fans that attended each game; the ushers were helpful and didn't wait for us to ask for assistance when it looked like we needed it; and we never had a problem finding available souvenir stands, concessions, and restrooms.

Aisles between seating sections were designed so fans could move from section to section without walking in front of other fans. Many restaurants and private suites were tucked in between seating levels to allow different vantage points while eating dinner.

Large towering scoreboards showing scores from other games sat snugly in each corner of the ballpark. The massive scoreboard hanging behind the center field wall was easy to read and complimented the powerful and inviting sound system that welcomed us when we entered the stadium.

Most surprising, however, was the playing field itself. Even though the summer heat and occasional rain shower had the retractable roof closed for most of the Diamondbacks' games, the outfield grass was a natural Bull's Eye Bermuda - this "indoor" playing field had real grass! The team took good care of the field by opening the roof for sunlight whenever possible and blasting incandescent light as a substitute when the roof was closed.



The Houston Astros were tonight's opponent. Kris kept score in a new scorebook given to us by a co-worker for this trip. With every out in every inning we knew this would be an incredible journey. As Arizona pitcher Miguel Batista prepared to take the mound in the bottom of the second inning, we rested back in our seats and watched the videos on the scoreboard. All of a sudden, the cameras turned to... us! A center field camera located us and the scoreboard flashed the message, "Timothy Lux, visiting all 30 ballparks."

Kris and I waved to the camera and the message sparked conversations with those around us, who were mostly excited that *they* had been on the scoreboard as well. The Diamondbacks organization had indeed received my e-mail about the trip, routed the message to the cameraman and scoreboard operator, and surprised us with a moment in the spotlight. That was icing on the cake. I smiled the rest of the night.

Before we knew it, the inning was over, despite two Arizona base hits. Still reeling from the experience, we focused back on the game and watched as the Astros scored six runs to shutout the home team 6-0. There weren't any towering home runs into the pool, or any spectacular fielding plays. It was just one of those slow and comfortable evenings of baseball in Arizona.

There was, however, a team full of determination. Houston Astros' second baseman Craig Biggio played in his 1,871<sup>st</sup> game, which set a new club record for total games played. Biggio was a short and stocky player; one of the old fashioned, eye-black wearing, get dirty-types of fielders. Watching him play reminded me of Pete Rose, the Charlie Hustle, how the uniform would always be dirty at the end of the game and how new bumps and bruises simply covered those received the night before. Biggio wasn't afraid to run out a routine ground ball or attempt a full-extension dive to snag hard hit line drives in the hole. He wasn't the type to make headlines with his power or assault on single season records. Biggio was, though, the type to slowly make a dent in long-standing club records – the kind of record players take years to reach. Tonight he went 2 for 4, both singles, and raised his average to .310.



After the game we walked back through the warm Phoenix air to our untouched motorhome, where the dogs greeted us with happy tails. Their eyes begged us to bring them inside the next ballpark we visit, even though we know they would be ejected for running onto the field to chase after the baseball. The simple pleasures of life become more and more evident each day I spend with my dogs.

The next ballpark, Coors Field in Denver, is two long days away. We'll leave first thing in the morning – right after our first night away from home.