

1999

I was single again. Knowing that most of my previous relationships involved women I'd met in bars made me to want to look elsewhere. This time would be different, I said to myself. This time, I would look online using my computer.

I had outgrown AOL by then, but I resubscribed because they still had a lot of members and more importantly, they had an enormous searchable member database. I asked it to show me single women in my area who listed "computers" as a hobby and Dianne was at the top of the list. We chatted online for a few days and exchanged pictures of ourselves and then one morning I went to meet her at her job at Waffle House.

I'm quite certain neither of us saw the other as "The One" at first. There was, however, enough mutual interest that we kept chatting on the computer and before long, we had our first official date. It was, as I recall, a sunset walk on Siesta beach. There was wine. We held hands.

In a shocking departure from long tradition on my part, we did not have sex on that first date, or the second, or even the third. Instead, we took some time and got to be friends before we began rubbing each other's sweaty bits. I had never done it this way before, and I'm pretty sure Dianne hadn't, either. There was the danger of one becoming Friend Zoned while the other wanted more, but, spoiler alert, it worked!

The ironic twist is I might just as easily have met Dianne in a bar, as she was certainly no stranger to them. Would we be together today if that's where we'd met? If we had hooked up in a bar and stumbled home and done the dirty deed, would I be writing this Short History now? Honestly, I don't think so. How we started is an important part of who we are.

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We don't have an exact date to mark the beginning of Us, but it was somewhere around May 1, 1999, so May Day is also Our Day. We were both 42 years old, full of life, and horny as goats. We were, as the old saying goes, old enough to know better and young enough to do it anyway.

Still, we didn't hurry our new relationship. Dianne had her house and her job and I had my house and my job. Sometimes she would spend the night with me, and sometimes she wouldn't. My house, though, had a nice in-ground swimming pool with a privacy fence and we spent many afternoons that summer splashing around in the pool and laying naked in the sun in my back yard.



Dianne

So, life was good. Born just a couple months apart, we came from the same era. We were both beer drinkers and pot smokers and we mostly liked the same music. We waxed nostalgic over the same old television shows, we shared a cultural zeitgeist, we could relate. Most importantly, we liked each other.

We were two people who found each other at the right time and in the right place. We've talked about it and agree that we would never have made it as a couple had we met 10 years earlier. It was serendipity, 1999-style, and it was the beginning of a whole new life for both of us.

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Something to know about me is I enjoy nudism with likeminded people. I had experienced nude beaches years before in California and loved them. One of the things I liked best about our Sarasota house with its pool and privacy fence was that freedom from clothes.

It's not for everyone, though, and since our back yard was almost always a clothing-optional zone, we had two sets of friends. Those we could invite to a typical weekend afternoon "beers around the pool" party, and those we couldn't. If you knew us back then, you know which group you were in.

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Our first overnight trip together was a drive to Key West for a weekend at a resort called Atlantic Shores. I had read about it on the Internet and knew to expect a largely gay clientele and a clothing-optional pool and bar. This would be a new experience for Dianne, if not for me. We took off in my old van on a Friday after work, drove to Homestead and checked into a cheesy roadside motel. The next morning we drove the rest of the way to Key West and got our room at Atlantic Shores which was also kinda cheesy, but in a fantastic location on the south end of the island.

The pool and bar areas at Atlantic Shores were, indeed, clothing-optional with a largely gay crowd. Completely non-threatening and anonymous, it was perfect for Dianne's introduction to

public nudity, making it easier to relax and have fun. When darkness fell, the party at Atlantic Shores really started. There was a stage set up with a DJ and a few hundred people and it was a hoot! The place pulsed with techno beats and strobe lights and there were drag queens and buff g-string'd dancers and throngs of partiers. It was loud and naughty and it was a whole lot of fun.

The Florida Keys are unlike any place I've ever been. The drive down from Miami is more than 100 miles of two lane road with a speed limit of 45 or less most of the way and dozens of bridges. There are boats, fishing villages, and thousands of pelicans and gulls. But while there are plenty of other things to see and do along the way, Key West is the crown jewel of the Keys. On Saturday we rented a scooter and rode around town soaking it up. As I recall, it rained that afternoon and chased us back to our room, but we loved it all.



Key West • June 1999

We couldn't know it then, but Key West would become party central for us for the next 15 years. We also didn't know, although one might have guessed, that Key West would change continuously over the coming years. One early casualty would be Atlantic Shores, itself, which would close in 2007 to be torn down and replaced by very expensive condos.

Shortly after the Key West trip we made our first journey to Haulover Beach, another place that we would visit repeatedly in the coming years. Haulover Beach, located in North Miami, was at the time the only legal public nude beach in Florida and it is beautiful. A long, long stretch of beach complete with lifeguards and concessions.

If you wanted to be able to walk from your hotel room to Haulover beach, there was only one good choice. A couple hundred yards north stood a little cement block two story roadside motel called Ocean Palms. It was an anacronym. An old Florida time capsule surrounded by towering high rise condominiums, including a trio of Trump Towers under construction on the north side. We loved that little place and always tried to get the same room overlooking the pool and closest to the beach.

Ocean Palms is long gone now, of course, closed in 2009. Doomed by its location being far more valuable than the business, a high-rise Ritz-Carlton now occupies that space.

It was at Haulover Beach where we had a stranger snap a photo of us standing naked with the Atlantic Ocean at our backs, and damned if we didn't look good! When we got home I scanned that picture and printed it. I put the picture in an 8x10 frame and for decades it hung way back in a hidden corner of our utility room where no one would see it and was largely forgotten. Not forever, though. The story of that picture will pick back up in year 2023.

I wanted to travel to Kansas at the end of August that year to attend my high school class' 25th reunion and I needed a cat sitter. My 18 year old tomcat, Sylvester, was diabetic and required twice daily insulin shots. What to do? Perhaps my new girlfriend could help.

Dianne and Sly didn't really care for each other. She had never owned a pet and didn't know anything about cats. Worse, Sly was a grouchy old tomcat with health issues. Still, I asked her if she would move in for a week and she said yes. She brought her computer to my house and she and Sly had the place to themselves and as far as I could ever tell, they both had a nice little vacation from me.

As for me, the reunion was great fun and I was glad I went. I was working as a contractor at the time, which meant I had no paid time off. I'm pretty sure this was my first vacation from work since moving to Florida 18 months earlier.

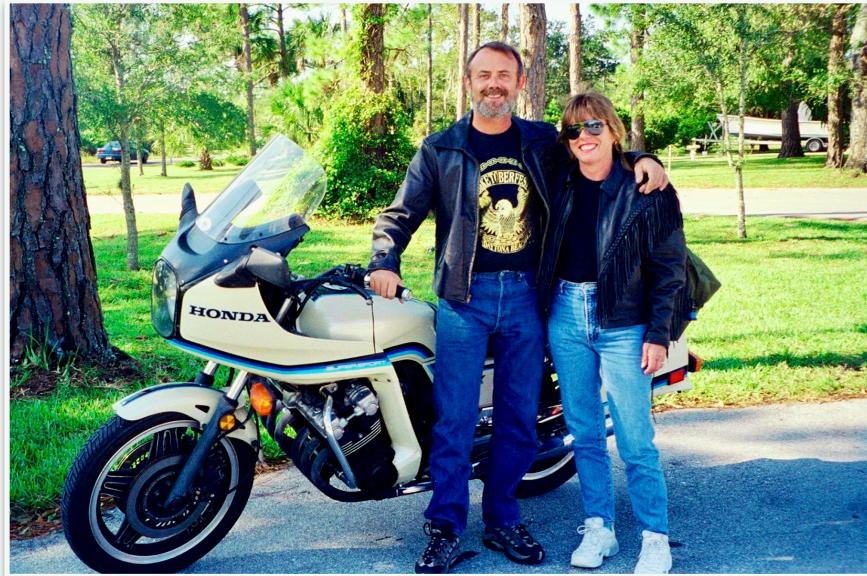
We've both always seen this as an important step in the story of us. I left everything I had in Dianne's hands and never doubted.

There are a number of things I wanted when I was younger that, in hindsight, it was a good thing I couldn't have. One of those things was the early '80s Honda CBX motorcycle. It was huge, a top-heavy air-cooled 6 cylinder beast. If I could have had one in 1982, I would surely have died.

I couldn't afford one then, but I never forgot about it. By the time Dianne and I met, I was a much different person and when I came across a 1982 CBX for sale one day I wrote the check and rode away happy. I can't say Dianne loved the motorcycle as much as I did, but she was a trooper and jumped on back whenever I wanted to go somewhere.

Around the end of October, Dianne and I packed and strapped my old Army duffle on the back of the bike and rode it a couple hundred miles to Daytona for a couple nights of Biketoberfest, aka Halloween in Daytona. On the way home we detoured to Cape Canaveral and toured the NASA museums and space launch facilities there before riding on home.

It was our first and last overnight trip on the motorcycle. We had fun, but it was also occasionally cold and inconvenient and we weren't part of any motorcycle group, so we rode alone. We never saw the need to travel that far on the bike again.



Returning from Biketoberfest • October 1999

I kept the bike another half dozen years, but rode less and less every passing year until I finally sold it rather than let it rot in the back yard. It was an unexpected end to my motorcycling, something I'd done most of my adult life. I can't explain why, but I simply lost interest and let it go. I like to think I quit while I was ahead.

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I will, as this story goes along, introduce a cast of characters. There will be Waffle House people, both coworkers and customers, FCCI employees, aka my own cow-orkers, and our neighbors up and down the street where we lived. In addition, there were our internet friends, people we met online, some of whom we went on to befriend in the flesh and others who we've not met in person to this day but are, nonetheless, our friends.

First and foremost for this part of our story, there's the trio of Max, Amanda, and Dorleen. Max was Dianne's previous boyfriend and also a coworker at Waffle House. Max and his girlfriend, Amanda were to become regulars, and there was Dorleen, another Waffle House associate and Dianne's buddy who also was a fixture at our house.



Dorleen & Dianne

These three, more than anyone else in those early days, were our best friends.



Max



Amanda

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Dianne and I were now almost always together and in December we bowed to the obvious. We were a solid couple and Dianne was spending most of her time at my house. It was time to cohabitate. We enlisted Max, who had a pickup truck, to help and soon enough Dianne's bedroom set supplanted my trusty old waterbed and we were officially living in sin.

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Our house was in a neighborhood with the earliest "cable modem" fast Internet connection capability. While almost everyone else was still using a phone line to dial-up, our connection was always-on and was dozens or even hundreds of times faster. In 1999, this was a Very Big Deal for anyone who liked playing with the nascent internet of the time. When Dianne moved in, I built a big delta shaped desk in the living room and set our computers up to share the cable modem connection. We both owned Super-8 camcorders at the time and so we were equipped

for video chatting over the internet.

Video chatting in 1999 was laughably primitive. The videos were about the size of a postage stamp and it was slow, often very slow, since most of the rest of the internet was still using dial-up phone lines to connect. Still, it was fresh and exciting at the time and we quickly made friends with people all over the country as online communities sprang into being. Over the coming months and years we would go on to meet a good number of these new friends in person, sometimes traveling to see them and sometimes them coming to see us. Several remain close friends to this day.

Notably, there were Mark and Carol, a couple in Bartow and Amanda and Michael, who lived close by in Bradenton. There was Jessica, a single girl down in Fort Myers and Julie and Alan who lived in Alabama.

All these people and many more we met through a couple of internet video chatting programs. There was CU-SeeMe which created video chat “rooms” that any number of people could join and there was ICU2 which was for peer to peer chatting. As I mentioned earlier, the pictures were small and refreshed slowly and communication was strictly through text as the internet wasn’t fast enough to support both video and voice. It was new and fun and the people we met were real. Some of the couples we met are no longer together and some just faded away. Sadly, some of the friends we made are now deceased. Many, however, remain good friends to this day and we are thankful for them.

Somewhere around the end of the year, I had a brilliant idea for a gift for Dianne. She had long boasted about her prowess playing Ms Pac-Man in bars. We didn’t frequent any bars with a Mrs Pac-Man machine, but I did have a co-worker whose brother bought and sold old arcade cabinets. I inquired through him and before long had arranged for one to be delivered to our house.

The plan was to have Dianne occupied out back on the lanai while I took delivery of the cabinet and got it positioned and plugged it. It was gonna be a big surprise when she came back in the house and discovered it all lit up and ready to go. The plan went perfectly until I turned the machine on and accidentally pushed the button to start a game. The game started with that music that we all knew from 15 years earlier when the game was everywhere. Dianne heard the music from the lanai and came running. Still a nice surprise!



Ms Pac Man & Computer Central

25 years later and we still have that game cabinet. It's been updated to make it more reliable, but we still play. Doubtless the best \$600 I ever spent.

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I had moved to Florida in February 1998 to take a position as a contracted consultant at FCCI Insurance Group, a regional insurance company specializing in Workers Compensation Insurance. The Y2K panic was in full swing and companies were hiring programmers to review mountains of code to be ready for a feared software apocalypse on January 1, 2000.

I had never worked as a contractor before. The money seemed terrific at first glance, four times what I had been making in Tulsa. With that, though, came absolutely no benefits. No holidays, no vacation, no sick time, and no job security.

Indeed, I went into the job knowing that this contract gig would not be not forever, and as 1999 drew to a close and the company was confident they would survive Y2K, I was offered a choice. I could either move on and find employment elsewhere or I could take a position as an employee at FCCI.

I contacted the recruiters who had found the Sarasota gig for me and went to Tampa for a couple interviews, but in the end decided to take the job at FCCI. Becoming an employee meant taking a significant cut in pay, but at the same time receiving a corresponding increase in benefits and an significant potential for future growth. I really liked it in Sarasota, and I hate to move, so I took the job beginning December 31, 1999. The last day of the 1900s. It was absolutely the correct decision for me and it was the last job I would ever have.

2000

And then, the Monday Morning Massacre. Imagine, if you will, that you were just hired on to a new job and exactly one week later the company has its first large layoff, ever. Among the people fired are your new boss and her boss along with about 15% of the rest of the company, but not you, strangely enough. How's that for depressing? That's what happened to me to kick off my second week as an FCCI employee and it poisoned my attitude about my new employer for a good many years. It probably also affected management's opinion of me as I developed a reputation as something of a malcontent.

I would credit one person at FCCI who helped me keep my cool, Don Zimmerman. Don was a manager in the IT department and it was he who interviewed me by phone before I ever came to Florida. I wasn't working directly for him when the mass layoffs happened and, thankfully, he survived those cuts and probably kept me from blowing it with my new employer. I remember him coming to me soon after the massacre with one of the higher managers in tow and they gave me a couple days off to go cool down.

So, I did my job, and seemingly well enough to keep it as those layoffs were not the last, but never affected me. The family culture that I found when I began as a consultant a couple years before was permanently altered. Still, FCCI was a good place overall to work and eventually I got over the sting of how it all started and made it a career over the next 20 years.

As a sad postscript, the layoffs got Don a year later. We remained good friends, though, until his passing in 2017.



Don Zimmerman

Meanwhile, Dianne was happy working at Waffle House. She would go to work at early-thirty and be home in the middle of the afternoon with a beer and playing games on her computer. Being a waitress, she made almost nothing in wages but she did quite well with tips. She had been there over a decade by then and knew lots of the regulars customers and, of course, her coworkers. Her coworkers and customer-friends became my friends as well and formed the

majority of our social life away from the internet. Some of those folks remain our close friends to this day.

One of those coworkers was Betty. Betty was an older woman and she was retiring and moving away. She'd been working there a long time and had many friends among the regular customers. I don't remember whose idea it was, but our house was volunteered to host a going away party for Betty. It turned into quite a production. I don't remember how many people showed up, but it was a lot, probably 50 or more. It was enough people that we hired a porta-potty to be delivered to our back yard for the party.

One particularly humorous memory from that day was the decision to inflate a couple hundred white and blue balloons and float them in the pool. The plan was to inflate enough balloons to cover the entire surface of the pool. I don't recall how many, hundreds, and that was a lot for a few to accomplish so we started early. As I recall, it was me with an air compressor plus a couple kids blowing manually. We worked for hours, but got it done!

Then, when the sun came up over the roof of the house and started warming up the air in those balloons they began expanding, getting larger and larger and then they started popping. As it got warmer, more and more popped. It was awful and hilarious at the same time. It was a lesson that stayed with me, though. Always leave room for expansion!

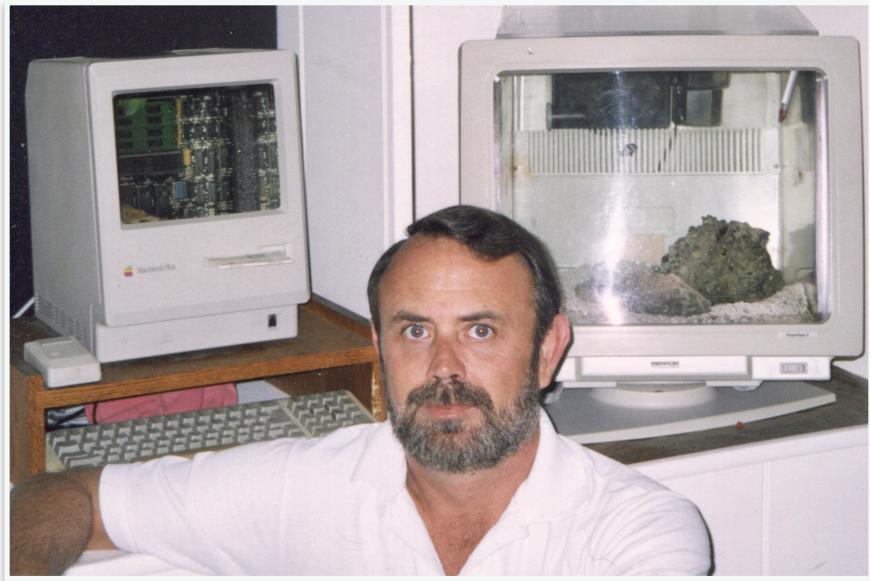


Tammy, Betty, Dianne

I would add another person to the cast of regulars, Tammy. Tammy was a Waffle House coworker and she was Dianne's right hand planning the party. Married to a man named Moe when I met her, Tammy was in the process of discovering she was a lesbian. She split with Moe and took up with a woman called CA and to my knowledge, is with her to this day.

I had a side hustle in those days. I would take old Macintosh computers, the all-in-one models

from the 80s, and convert them into aquariums and sell them. I also converted a few big monitors and even an oak end table into aquariums. This was a thing in the 90s and I was, in a minor way, internet famous with my “Macquariums” being featured in several computer magazines and a few newspapers.



Jim with Macquarium & Monitor Aquarium

I had been doing this for a couple years before moving to Florida and I kept it up after my move. I bought as many as I could on eBay, not caring if they worked, so long as I could get it to my door for around \$25. By the beginning of the year 2000 I had built and sold a couple dozen Macquariums and I had a stockpile of about 50 old computers on hand. The World Wide Web was just getting revved up and I wanted a website to promote my aquariums. Macquarium.com was already taken so techquarium.com was born.

After a year or so in Florida, I was making great money at work so I stopped building and selling Macquariums. We kept the website, though, and since January, 2000 this has been our “Home on the Web.” The aquarium side hustle was in the distant past, but our website remained as a repository for thousands of our pictures. Nothing lasts forever, though, and a combination of changes in internet tech and rising costs forced the pictures offline in late 2024. We still own the domain as of this writing, but only use it for email.

As for that stockpile of computers, over the next few years I converted all that remained into planters, but more on that later.

I should mention that I knew diddly-squat about swimming pools when I moved in at the beginning of September of 1998, right at the beginning of the easiest season to take care of a pool. I found myself woefully unprepared the following spring and summer for the algae blooms and evaporation and other pool headaches. I'll never forget asking the help at the pool store how to add water to the pool and being astounded when told I needed to drag a garden hose over and turn it on. They're probably still laughing at me. I was a bad pool boy.

When Dianne moved in she almost completely took over maintenance of the pool, and that was

a very good thing. For the next 20 years she would be the pool girl and it always looked great. It wasn't always easy. There was a Jacaranda tree right next to the pool and while it was beautiful, it also rained millions of tiny leaves into the pool. We tried several things, from homemade leaf catchers in front of the overflow to solar blankets to catch the leaves. Nothing worked and sometime that year we complained to our landlady and she had the tree removed, making pool maintenance a lot easier.



L-R Tammy, CA, Amanda, April, Dianne

Pool parties, as much as anything, became our social center. Lots of houses in Florida have swimming pools, but not many were as large or as open as ours.

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We'd been living together just a few months when Dianne suggested we open a savings account together to establish an emergency fund for us. I'm certain Judge Judy would have advised us against it, but we had a good feeling and ran with it. We started with \$1500 each. Her money came from hard work and a frugal lifestyle while mine came from a couple years of making more money than I knew what to do with. It marked a turning point, for me at least, as it was the first time in my life that I saved money for no purpose other than having some money saved. It was pretty much the first time I ever had extra money beyond payday to payday.

Having commingled our finances that far, we next went and financed an almost new car together, a 1999 Ford Escort sedan. It was to replace my aging van which was no longer reliable for long trips. So, we had a joint bank account and now a car loan together. We drove that little car all over. We took it to Kansas twice and Key West multiple times and sold it in 2005. It would be our last car with a back seat for the next 12 years. It was also the last car we ever smoked in.



Dianne Washes Our New Car

As for the van, I sold it to some Russian mobsters who were in-laws to one of my co-workers.
True story!

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In August Dianne's brother, Richard, got married. It was my first introduction to Dianne's sisters and their first chance to meet to me. Of the five siblings, Richard was in the middle. His two older sisters are Cyn and Pat, and the two younger sisters are Dianne and Donna. All the siblings were at the wedding. A thing I've always liked and admired about Dianne's family is their willingness and ability to all get together, despite living long distances apart.



L-R Donna, Dianne, Richard, Pat, Cyn

I had met Richard already. He lived in Zephyrhills, Florida which was about a 90 minutes drive for us. Cyn was living in Michigan and Donna and Pat lived in Rhode Island. Richard and his new wife Maria were, as I would soon discover, an amazingly creative and entertaining couple.



Richard & Maria

The wedding was beautiful, but also fun. As I said, Richard and Maria were creative. Among other things, they owned and operated a Comedy Murder Mystery Dinner Theater troupe. More on that, later.

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Our first road trip in our new Ford was to my hometown in Kansas. We stopped in Tallahassee for the night and stayed with a friend of mine from Kansas, Sandy. We then stopped for another night in Mobile, AL to meet with internet friends, Alan & Julie. From there we went on up into ... somewhere in Alabama, I don't remember exactly where and visited with a couple called Rodeo Gal & Skeeter, whose real names escape us now, and separately, Kevin, aka Southern Man. These were all friends we had met using our video chat setup.



L-R Dianne, Julie, Alan

We were really happy that we routed this trip to visit in person these internet friends. Everyone we met in real life for the first time was nice, no serial killers, no weirdos. We were a bit taken aback by Rodeo Gal & Skeeter, though. We visited them at their home thinking we would take them someplace nice for dinner. As it turned out, they have 8 children at home and the entire dozen of us went to a buffet restaurant. That was fun, too, but not what we had envisioned.



Dianne

The timing of our road trip was the last week of October when Ark City holds an annual festival called Arkalalah. It comes with a carnival that sets up in a big parking lot across the street from

my dad's house, where we would be staying.

This was Dianne's first introduction to my family and Kansas friends and naturally, they all loved her. We partied with my favorite ex-wife, Vicki, went to the carnival, and hung out with my high school friends. We wild monkey sex in the big upstairs front bedroom of dad's house while the Tilt-A-Whirl carnival ride across the street went WHAM WHAM WHAM in rhythm with us... Good times.

It was also Dianne's introduction of Arkansas City, Kansas. A town of 13-ish thousand people, down a few thousand from when I last lived there in the mid 90s, located about an hour south of Wichita. Just four miles from Oklahoma, it's where I was born and raised. My dad was a policeman and chief of police all through my high school years and beyond.

Dad's house was a two story brick home located just one block from the middle of downtown and within easy walking distance to the police department. It was also just a couple blocks from the high school and local junior college.

That said, the house was built in 1905 so it was already old when we moved there in the summer of 1971. The location couldn't be beat, though, with the carnival across the street, the big parade just a block away, and a back yard you could offer for parking to favored friends and relatives. It was also home away from home whenever I would travel to Kansas. The front porch was a great place to sit with a cup of coffee and watch the world go by.



Dianne & the Arkalalah Carnival

On the way home we took the southern route and stopped in Biloxi for a night at one of the floating casinos where we found a cheap blackjack table and gambled a bit. We found that we both like to gamble, but neither of us had the stomach for losing much money.

Sylvester died the night we got home. We had left him in kennel at a vet named Dr Pepper. Sly

was diabetic, so we also left his insulin and syringes along with instructions. The day we picked him up he was so weak he could not stand to come out of his carrier. To this day I think his care with Dr Pepper was substandard and contributed to his passing when he did. Sly had been my companion for almost 20 years, having followed me from Kansas to Oklahoma and then to Florida. I buried him deep in the back yard. It was a hard hole to dig.



Sylvester

Sylvester had been gone about a month when I found a newspaper advert for a free kitten in Englewood. I hopped in my van and off I went, returning home with baby Rocky. Rocky was maybe 10 or 12 weeks old and he'd been living outdoors under a cement porch. He was a kind of shy kitten but would soon grow into an extra large and extra furry friendly lazy fat cat.

I've had cats my whole life, but Rocky was the first that was to be an indoor cat with no exceptions. Sylvester had been an indoor/outdoor cat most of his life until he got too old to want to roam. While Rocky had apparently been born outdoors, we intended to make him a strictly indoor cat.



Rocky

Rocky had other ideas, however. He always wanted out, and as he grew, he got big enough to push screens out and escape. Keeping Rocky confined kept me busy concocting schemes to prevent his escape. I even tried an electric fence wire around the lanai but it didn't work. It's not like he wanted out for any particular reason, he just wanted out. Since the lanai was his principle avenue of escape we ultimately just didn't let him go unsupervised out on the lanai.

I don't remember what we did for our first Christmas in 1999. In 2000, however, we had our first big Christmas party at home, and it was a rocking success!. It was to be the first of many.



L-R ?, ?, Amber, Lisa, Tanya, Tracy, Richard, Dorleen, Maria, ?, Jim, April, Richard Foster

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For Christmas this year, my dad gave me a digital camera. It was a Kodak with a whopping 1 megapixel resolution, and I was hooked. I've always been a shutterbug, taking lots of pictures was my thing but the advent of digital cameras kicked me into a higher gear. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of these earliest digital pictures from December, 2000 are of Rocky.



Rocky & Jim