

VIM TRIP TO AUSTELL, GEORGIA JANUARY 10-16, 2010

Eleven of us went to Austell, Georgia: Jim Andrew, Nancy Andrew, Dale Springer, Maria Springer, Fred Crider, Brian May, Steve Headley, Ken Waters, Hank Ratrie, Bruce Wehrle, and Carol Engel. Dale, Maria, and Fred drove to Georgia ahead of the rest as they were visiting family in the area.

SUNDAY:

On Sunday, January 10, at 6:30 AM in 14-degree weather, the remaining 8 met at Towson United Methodist Church where Pastor Mary Jo blessed us before leaving. Hank and Ken drove Hank's van and the remaining six piled in Jim Andrew's 1952 converted-touring-to-camper BUS. Off we went on our 13-½ hour drive to Lithia Spring, Georgia, only stopping one time to order lunch and quickly carry it to the bus. We arrived at our residence at 8:30 where Maria had prepared dinner for us. (She had brought white chili with her.) What a welcome sight!

We stayed in a house right next to the Lithia Springs United Methodist Church. It had two full baths, a very complete kitchen, and various other rooms where we set up camp. The girls had a room and bath of our own; the men spread out into three other rooms with their bath.

MONDAY:

Monday morning we had a quick breakfast and off we went to check into the North Georgia Disaster Response Center for our assignment. We were given one house, a split foyer where the bottom level had been flooded and needed complete restoration. When we arrived at the house, we realized we were too many people for this one house, so we contacted the Response Center again and were given a second house, again a split foyer where the bottom level had been destroyed. We divided up into teams, basically one for each house.

In the meantime, Dale and his "girls" did the grocery shopping for the week, getting the kitchen organized. They were back at the site to work by lunch.

House #1 was in a cul-de-sac very near the creek that had overflowed its banks extremely rapidly. In the cul-de-sac was a foundation of a house (two houses away) that had burned to the ground. While the water was rising the house caught fire and when the fire engine arrived to put out the fire, the water had risen so high the firefighters could not fight the blaze and the fire engine was caught in the flooding waters. It was totally destroyed from the flood and the house burned to the ground.

In House #1 lived a father and 11-year-old son and we believe a mother as well. Some of us met the father when he came home to let out the dog, but we did not hear any of his stories. When Jessie, the son, came home from school, he came down to say hello to us, but didn't really talk much. They had a little dog that greeted us with his barking each morning when we arrived. The downstairs walls had already had sheet rock put up, but we needed to mud the walls and sand (repeatedly) and hopefully get ready to paint. Jim and Hank worked on installing a drop ceiling in the main room. There was also a bathroom, laundry room, and hallway up the stairs from where we worked. Jim, Hank and Ken were the team for House #1.

House #2 was also on a cul-de-sac near the creek. We knew there was a little girl that had lived there and a young woman who came back to the house at night and studied, but they apparently did not sleep there. We did not meet the owner of House #2. The vinyl siding on the lower level of the house had been removed and inside were two rooms and a small closet under the stairs, as well as a hallway that needed wallboard, mudding, and sanding. This house had mostly exposed beams when we arrived and we really had to start from scratch. It also needed the vinyl siding replaced on the bottom of the house. Bruce, Brian, Steve, and Fred were the team for House #2. Dale, Maria, Nancy, and Carol worked wherever the need was between the two houses.

The first day was spent getting oriented to the jobs that needed to be done and getting to work. We ate lunch at whatever house we were working in. In House #2 we could go upstairs into the living room where there were a few chairs and a sofa. We stopped working around 3:00-4:00 and returned to our house where Maria always had a lovely little spread of goodies waiting to nibble while everyone was getting showered and changed. Dinner was fixed (Maria had brought spaghetti sauce) and some of us played rummy after dinner.

Our house was about 100 yards from railroad tracks with freight trains coming through all the time. They blew their whistle because we were right by a railroad crossing and must have come at least once an hour at times. There was a 6:30 AM train every morning and when we heard that one we knew our sleeping time was almost over. House #1 was also right beside railroad tracks and at times we felt the train was coming in right through the window. How I loved the trains!

TUESDAY:

Dale's "girls" pulled up carpeting and padding in House #1 and in both houses everyone was busy installing drywall, mudding, and sanding. This would be our routine almost every day.

When we arrived at House #2, we noticed people working in another house 2 doors away. When talking with them we learned they are Mennonites from Canada. They have a compound not far from the house where the women cook while the men work on the houses. They bring their campers and trailers full of equipment, and will be here until spring when they will return home to farm. The men and women apparently rotate in and out during the time they are here.

Dinner was "no bologna macaroni" that Maria made. Everyone was tired at night and most times we gathered in the kitchen or "living room" and read or played cards or just talked. Bed always felt good.

WEDNESDAY:

While we were working in House #1, Jason, from the Disaster Response Center, came to check and see if we needed anything. He was a firefighter in Atlanta. He worked 3 days a week and was on loan to the Response Center the rest of the time. He came by several times and was very interesting to listen to, telling us many stories about the flood.

It began raining from Saturday to Sunday. The ground was so saturated the water had nowhere to go and the flooding began. The Chattanooga River overflowed its bank, but it also pushed water into the creeks and they ran over their banks. The water rose very quickly (which is what happened to the fire engine). Jason told us his wife was trying to get home to Austell over a bridge and was very frightened. She was one of the last 10 cars allowed over the bridge before it was closed due to flooding. She and Jason were then encircled by water and had to remain in Austell for three days before they could get out. The worst flooding was on Interstate 20 near Six Flags and 285 (the alternate beltway).

Wednesday night we decided to go out to dinner. Jason recommended a barbeque place *Fred's* as having authentic southern barbecue, so after a little investigation we decided to head for *Fred's*. They put us in our own room in the back of the restaurant (which was a good thing). Fred is a 76-year-old man who has had the restaurant for many years and loves what he is doing. He came back and visited with us while we were eating and told us stories and chatted. Donna, who took our orders, was so much fun to listen to (her accent was VERY southern) and our other waitress (who wore a shirt that said "Let It Snow – Someplace Else!") was delightful. We had a fun night.

THURSDAY

Dale's "girls" went to house #2 to work on the outside. Steve and Brian were working on replacing the siding. The sheathing had to be removed and Tyvek-like material wrapped around the new sheathing before the siding could be put up. On the front, one more board needed to be taken off. Dale and the rest worked hard on getting it loose and Dale gave it one more big pull to take it off completely. It came off! Dale ended up falling in the

sticker bush and down on the ground, board on top. Fortunately, he was not hurt. Unfortunately, the cameras were not at the ready! In House #2, lots of mudding was still happening – the drywall work had been completed. On House #1, we were able to begin painting the large room even though sanding was still being done in the other rooms. It was great to paint, giving us an opportunity to visualize what the finished room would look like. The drop ceiling was completed also.

As we left the house, Jim and Hank had seen a train engine stopped on the tracks behind the house we were working on. Hank drove to the spot and let Carol take a picture of the engine (she wanted one for John) – so nice of him.

On the way home from House #1 that day, Jim spotted the “Christian Catfish Hole.” We had to explore so we drove in to see what it was. We met the owner who had two ponds he stocked with fish – one to catch and release and one to catch and keep. In the catch and release pond he had one fish 85 pounds! It was interesting to talk with him – so glad we stopped.

We had lasagna for dinner and discussed the next day. Originally we were going to go into Atlanta to the Aquarium, but people were beginning to think they would like to just get on the road back to Baltimore. After talking about it, we all decided we would leave after lunch on Friday and head home.

Each day as we entered or left the house, there was a little gray kitten by the door, trying his best to get in. (One time he did get in.) We decided to give him some milk and let him lick the lid of the lasagna pan. He was so cute and we loved petting him and talking to him. I think he might miss us.

FRIDAY

Each morning Fred led devotions or asked someone to do it. On Friday he asked Dale and Maria and their devotions were to ask each of us what we would take away from the trip. As we shared our thoughts, it was clear that the trip had meaning for all of us and that we had come together as a group helping others.

We went to our two houses and finished what we could. In House #1 we had mudded, sanded, cleaned up, painted, put in a drop ceiling, put new hinges on the entry door, and installed a toilet in the bathroom. In House #2 we had put vinyl siding on two sides of the house, put in drywall, mudded, and sanded. While we did not finish either house, we had done a lot of work in each. Hopefully, the next group coming after us will complete House #1 and, hopefully, get close to completing House #2. As we left the houses for the last time, we had the feeling we had made a difference for these two families – it was a good feeling.

We came back to our house, had lunch, and packed up ready to leave. One final picture was taken and off we went – Fred to his grandson’s in North Carolina, Dale and Maria to family near Atlanta, Ken and Hank in the van headed home and the BUS. We stopped once for gas on the way home, but other than that drove straight through – 14 hours. We arrived at Towson United Methodist Church on Saturday morning at 3:30 AM, tired but feeling so happy about our trip and all that we accomplished.

We didn’t accomplish miracles, we didn’t totally rebuild a house, but we did give of our labor to another in need. We did it lovingly, caring for each other along the way, sharing laughter, bruises, fun, and fatigue together. This is the “mission” in Volunteers in Mission.