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Who Do We Think We Are?

A Tale of Mine Shafts, Caving Ground, Wilderness, Weed Whackers, Wolves and Fat Tire Bikes.

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Who we say we are matters because it determines what we do next. The stories we tell about ourselves, our communities or even our nation circumscribe and define our possibilities. We construct the future premised on our understanding of the present and past. We can change the story, modify the narrative, and in doing so, make different decisions and define a different future. Over the past one hundred years the narrative in this beloved peninsula has evolved from one that justified unbridled resource destruction to a narrative that now embraces significant protection for almost forty-seven percent of the total land area or 7,719 square miles and evinces tremendous pride in the splendors of nature. There is more protected land area in the Upper Peninsula than the entire land areas of Connecticut, Delaware and Rhode Island. Total land area of the U.P. is larger than the states just named as well as New Jersey, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Hawaii and Maryland.

I am an Ishpeming boy, a toothy baby boomer born just after the war. In my boyhood world the old rules about land, air, water, fish, trees, plants and animals still applied as they did nearly everywhere else. Not long ago I went to a reception at what used to be called Mather Cottage, now Cliffs Cottage. In 1891 William Gwinn Mather was the President of what was then Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company. He served as the autocratic corporate head for forty-two years. Mather Cottage, a large log cabin structure, was Mather's Ishpeming residence although his home was in an ostentatious Cleveland, Ohio mansion. Mather's cottage is on the south bluff in Ishpeming. As I sipped wine and nibbled cheese I realized that from this deliberate perch Mather not only looked down and over Ishpeming, but he looked down on the elaborate and fancy, but now demolished, company homes at the foot of the bluff where his local executives lived. My Ishpeming was Mather's town. The company was the company, neither good nor bad, but its presence and the presence of the other mining companies was pervasive. Mining shaped the town, altered the landscape and attracted the polyglot immigrants who gambled away familiar old worlds for a shot at a better life in the United States.

The immigrant generation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came seeking economic opportunity. For most of them life was precarious, hand to mouth, and uncertain. While they could appreciate nature and beauty, they had no control over what happened to their surroundings. Surviving their hardscrabble lives trumped all other concerns. Their narratives were all about survival and the struggle to make better lives for their children.

My backyard was Lake Angeline, which had been drained, mined and then refilled with water but surrounded by the detritus and landscape of mining. We did not call it Lake Angeline. It was still "the pit." We

played around the fenced shafts and in the crumbling brick of engine houses and dries. The hills around our house were devoid of big trees because they were all cut for use in the mines or as fuel for charcoal kilns. There were pits everywhere since the first mining was not underground but done by men with blasting powder, picks, shovels and mules wrestling rock out of holes they dynamited and dug. By the time I came along, pit mining was temporarily over and iron was blasted, trammed and hoisted out of deep underground shafts. Shaft head frames were the most prominent features on the horizon and they were surrounded by ancillary buildings, rock piles, and stock-piles of iron ore ready to ship. Miners spent the day shift drilling holes for explosive charges that were detonated at the end of the shift, thus loosening ore and waste rock to be hoisted to the surface. Everyone knew exactly when the charges went off because mine whistles blew, the town shook, dishes rattled and wives worried until the men got home.

Within a day, new snowfall turned pink with red ore dust. Our high school athletic teams were the Hematites, so named for the red iron ore that paid for everything and infiltrated the lungs of underground miners. Parts of Ishpeming and the diminutive surrounding communities were named for their mines. There was Barnum Location, Cleveland Location, Salisbury Location, Junction Location and more. Many locations grew as aggregations of housing around a particular mine with no formal plan for streets on a rectangular grid. One neighborhood in Ishpeming was just referred to as “tangle town.” Signs posted on barbed wire fences warning of “caving ground” were as common as stop signs. In neighboring Negaunee, whole neighborhoods and business blocks were moved so that the last pillars of iron bearing rock could be blasted out and hauled up for shipment. The economy was boom and bust pegged to steel prices.

We gave little thought to our wasted and compromised surroundings. People lived in degraded places in iron towns, copper towns, mill towns, and lumber towns all over the Upper Peninsula. The owners and managers of these industries lived elsewhere and profits flowed out. Upper Peninsula towns were the tips of the tentacles of industrial America. People who benefitted most did not live with the destructive consequences of decisions they made.

There was not much pride of place here then and we accepted the pink snow, miner’s lung and pock-marked land as the unavoidable cost of doing this sort of business. No mines, no mills, no jobs. Most of my generation could not wait to leave after high school, although some did a U-turn home after spending time on assembly lines and enmeshed in snarled city traffic. We knew there were good qualities of life here we loved. All of us loved camp, the woods, water, wildlife and solitude. But we did not think that these things had real value, and in some ways they marked us as being from, as we said then, “out in the sticks.”

We understood the Upper Peninsula was a commodity and while there were attractive attributes, everything was up for sale. We knew implicitly that we lived in a conquered landscape. Trees were to be harvested, rivers dammed, minerals mined, fish caught, animals hunted and invasive species tolerated. Although we accepted the inevitability of mine pits, clear-cut forests, sea lampreys, air and water pollution, dams and develop-

ment of all kinds, we also felt an often unspoken sense of loss. I think we did not speak of it because we thought it inevitable.

Most of us were schizophrenic in our attitudes about the destruction on the one hand and the innate beauty of what remained largely unspoiled. One person of my vintage who grew up around Newberry put it this way. “In our recent conversation, I did not emphasize enough how awesome the influence of the Big Lake is in my attitude toward land use and the U.P. and how it generally connects me to something bigger than leetle moi.” We did in an unspoken way love the place and regret the damage done in the name of progress, but we were ambivalent and of two minds about it.

I live in a secluded spot on the banks of the Escanaba River just below a stretch known as the Cataract. There is a dam a mile or so upstream with a huge penstock that directs the water downstream and into a hydro-power generator. The dam was built in 1929 to supply power to iron mines in the Gwinn area. What remains of the water flow here is a cataract flowing down a gorgeous rocky gorge between the dam and the power plant. What did this look like before the dam and before the power plant? I wistfully wish I could have seen what now only exists in photographs. I am certain that area residents here, when the river was dammed, were thrilled to have the improved power supply but that they also mourned the loss of a spectacular stretch of river of inherent beauty that is now sullied by the intrusion of artifacts from an industrial world.

My father owned a huge swathe of Lake Michigamme shoreline where he built our log camp. We relished camp for all the usual reasons and dad reveled in the solitude, distance from town, and a simplified life. But when it came time for him to retire, he decided to sell the area commonly called “Dutchman’s.” His reverence for the quiet and beauty dissipated as he surveyed the whole thing into lots, bulldozed new roads, arranged for power lines and sold the parcels for development. In my last image of him at camp, he is seated on the screened porch, enjoying a drink before dinner while vociferously complaining about the loud whine of weed whackers and lawn mowers in the background. How do we value the quiet, solitude and peace of natural places? How much money does it take to bribe us to accept cacophony, pollution, and loss of solitude?

Despite the ambivalence of residents, promising developments with regard to land and water took place not because attitudes in the Upper Peninsula changed, but because national attitudes toward wilderness, land and water protection, and protection of species continued to mature.

Ironic good fortune followed the destruction of forests. Deforested land up here had little or no value and so reverted to the state; or the federal government purchased it at rock bottom prices. The destruction of the Great Lakes fisheries and the collapse of the lake trout population aroused support for efforts to rehabilitate the fisheries and reduce the havoc caused by sea lamprey. But these efforts were led by government in response to land that was used up and water that was polluted and fished out. They did not reflect changed attitudes among Upper Peninsula residents.

Kathy and I moved to the Upper Peninsula in late 2012. For me it was homecoming, but she is a Missouri girl and this was a whole new world. For me it was a place with mesmerizing shadows of what once was, but it was brand new too. At first I was struck by the transformation of my Ishpeming from an economically vibrant compact community to a place with diminished population, vacant lots and a derelict downtown; where people no longer did their daily business and which no longer was the heart of the community. The old mining town narrative based on resource exploitation was as decrepit as the downtown. So much had changed that the Marquette Mining Journal recently referred to Ishpeming as a “sleepy bedroom community.”

However, within a short amount of time, I found myself surprised and delighted by a new self-consciousness in the U.P., which exuded a confident pride of place. There is now a sense on the part of most residents that we are privileged to live in a place of extraordinary beauty with a relatively pristine environment. There are now expanded wilderness areas. Moose are back. Pictured Rocks national lakeshore is a national treasure. Wolves howl. Eagles fly. People who live here no longer deprecate the place nor the quality of life enjoyed; rather the specialness of place is touted on license plates, in advertising, news stories, and in stickers that just say “906,” the Upper Peninsula Area Code. For the most part residents of the U.P. remain profoundly suspicious of government, protective of their individual rights and insistent on property rights. In this they are deeply conservative and they remain worried about jobs, since unemployment here continues at rates substantially higher than the rest of Michigan and the United States. When jobs and land ethics collide, the contest, as you all know, is ferocious.

Now it is not just state and federal government that protects land. Expanding chunks of land are protected by not-for-profit organizations and many individuals are choosing to create conservation easements on private property. Organizations such as the Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition have developed as grass roots efforts that now flourish as new counter weights to unbridled and rapacious exploitation of land and water. Native people are now often important allies in this effort. So now there are watchdogs and vocal opponents to misuse of this place. I understand concerns with the Eagle Mine and developments like it, but I frequently drive M-35 from my home to Palmer and remain stunned by the detritus of the Empire and Tilden Mines. I think devastation on that scale will not happen again because changed societal attitudes and citizen vigilance will successfully oppose it. Recent proposals to financially eviscerate the Environmental Protection Agency should arouse all of us who value what is pristine, clean, clear and beautiful in the Upper Peninsula. I sense that the growing pride of place in Upper Peninsula people, buttressed by growing environmental activism and the burgeoning economic opportunities of tourism based on natural beauty will help ensure that protected spaces in the U.P. stay that way.

Even the memory of the old narrative that justified what we now regard as wanton environmental destruction dissipates as those who remember are gone. The old stories are entombed in memorials such as the lower harbor ore dock in Marquette, the head frames preserved at the Cliffs Shaft Mine in Ishpeming, the

Quincy Mine in Hancock, the IXL Museum in Hermansville, the Cornish Pumping Engine in Iron Mountain or the former sawmill at Pequaming. Soon these places and others will just be relics and exist only as artifacts of the dead in the minds of the living as the old stories pass from living memory.

The acreage of protected land will continue to increase especially as individuals donate conservation easements or fee simple titles in parcels to private not-for-profits, such as the Nature Conservancy and the Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy. Increasing numbers of individuals and families are choosing to protect the natural values of their own property through such donations.

When I returned to the Upper Peninsula the unthinkable had happened; winter had become a tourist season. There were hundreds of miles of snowmobile trails, ski and snowshoe trails everywhere and now fat tire bike trails. People go to ice caves, they climb ice walls, and, of course, they spend money. Businesses catering to tourist pray for snow. Meanwhile the hunters and fisherman continue to come in all seasons leaving dollars behind. And the word is out that fall colors in the Upper Peninsula are unsurpassed. Tourism numbers are rising all over the Upper Peninsula and the region is touted in national magazines, newspapers and travel websites. This is our new narrative: pride in the natural splendor of our place and a conviction that ever expanding tourism will replace the jobs lost as the old narrative of immigrants and industry become outdated.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore is experiencing dramatic visitation increases, and this draw has spilled over to other national and state parks and recreation areas. Kayaking off of Pictured Rocks draws hordes in the summer season as Munising struggles to expand services for the influx of visitors. Traditional tourist draws like Mackinac Island continue to prosper. A 2014 study of U.P. counties done by Michigan State University identifies tourism as the industry with the greatest growth potential for the future. It focuses copious attention on the natural beauty and sparse population of the Upper Peninsula.

Many think that tourism has only inconsequential environmental impacts. But the opposite is true. Natural places like Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore can be “loved to death” and the very values that make the place attractive can be overwhelmed and destroyed by too many visitors. One kayaker from Chicago observed that “it was a little unorganized but our guide said that they just doubled the size of their business to accommodate so many people.... There were probably 80 people there for the Sunday morning trip. That's a lot of people to get organized.” No one in that group experienced the Pictured Rocks in quiet solitude. This experience in crowds is qualitatively different than the experience in solitude. What I notice now is that compared with sixty years ago the woods are full of very noisy, foul smelling machines. It becomes harder to experience solitude. I do not hear any public conversation in the Upper Peninsula about the adverse impacts of too much tourism. Every community in the U.P. is promoting tourism and we need to discuss at what point the sheer volume of people overwhelms what is most attractive. Many places in our world are now theme parks for tourists. That is not a good narrative.

Many in the Upper Peninsula worry about a declining population that is ageing. Leaders embrace

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growth in jobs, population and economic activity as essential for the region's future. While it may be anathema to call this time worn strategy of unending growth into question, this old axiom may not be compatible with the idea of protecting, expanding and enhancing the wilderness character and natural beauty of the region. An article published in "Second Wave: Upper Peninsula," Brian Martucci observed that "in Marquette, one of a handful of places to see population growth between 2000 and 2010, real estate development has quickened to a trot as local leaders awaken to the area's tremendous appeal to outdoorsy outsiders."

When I returned to the Upper Peninsula I noted that while Ishpeming's downtown was largely moribund, shopping out on U.S. 41 was booming all the way to Marquette. Further there are now neighborhoods in Ishpeming Township and Marquette Township that did not exist just a few decades ago. Then as Kathy and I roamed the U.P., I realized that nearly all towns up here were rearranged in the same way. Stores that supplied people's everyday needs were not in downtowns anymore and there is a patchwork of now vacant lots where stores used to be. Older housing in many towns is decrepit, sometimes unoccupied and sells cheap, but there is new housing on the periphery. Some people moved to camp and replaced rustic simple places with regular suburban type houses in the woods, demanding all season roads and access to public services. And in some places along Lake Superior and inland lakes like Michigamme, outsiders and natives alike have built "McMansions" on huge parcels of land. So I call this the great spreading out. Our population is static but we occupy much bigger chunks of land. This movement destroys natural areas and results in increased taxes to support government services provided over greatly expanded geographical areas and it undermines resident's sense of community because they no longer live close together.

In addition to extending protection to wild land, it is also time to limit expanded land use that just reflects people rearranging living spaces based on a preference for larger lots and fewer neighbors. There are models called "urban growth boundaries" that are used in other parts of the country. Such boundaries go by different names, but they exist to encourage agreed upon population density, infill of vacant areas, protection of natural areas, and to reduce the cost of government services. Our new narrative extolling the beauty and recreation potential of where we live should also embrace the means to protect our place from unnecessary sprawl. Think about drawing boundaries around where development will be permitted as well as where it will not.

Our new narrative cannot be based on growth if we really want to maintain the values that make the Upper Peninsula special. Some think that a growing population, increased tourism and economic development are compatible with protecting the very attributes of this place that we hold dear. I cannot think of an example elsewhere where this is true. The market does not value intangibles, but only those things that can be bought and sold at a set price. Yet we who live here know that it is the intangibles we value most – absolute quiet, unspoiled darkness, unencumbered solitude, white snow, wind sounds, water noise and that irreplaceable sense of being small but connected to everything surrounding us.

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The Upper Peninsula exerts a powerful sense of place. Lake Superior, some of the oldest rock on the planet, forests primeval, unspoiled streams, snow piled high, powerful winters, northern lights, mosquitoes, black flies, wildflowers, eagles, butterflies, blueberries, speckled trout, whitefish, wolves, birch trees, and a list that has no apparent end. We have woven these things into a story of beauty and splendor and specialness that we cherish as our new narrative. I sense that this narrative is widely shared and that is a really good place to start making our common future.