

4 LAKEVILLE

One of the most interesting and exciting places we lived during my childhood was an old, abandoned farmhouse near Lakeville, Michigan.

We moved in during the late spring of 1966 after our return from a one year stay in Colorado. Evidently our family still suffered from the effects of being poor, as I so vividly recall the orange "Condemned" signs that were plastered all over the front of the house that we took down on move-in day. Of course, that didn't stop my stepdad from renting the old place and it just upped the ante on the already high expectation that me and my brothers had.

The house sat near the road at the front of 320 acres of pastureland, which also had a solid mix of wooded areas and small ponds. There was a large barn with a hay loft, a sizable Quonset hut housing an enormous hog, and several other smaller buildings and sheds scattered throughout the property.

It also came with thirteen loud and rowdy “Coon” dogs, several dozen cattle, feral cats, and a front barn full of swallows, a barn owl and bats. Quite an exciting place for young boys and I was certain that my brothers and I were in for some serious adventure!

The front door of the house opened into the living room, which was more like a great room, large and open to the right side and the back. The dining area occupied the back portion, with a door to the utility room to the right of that. That utility room would haunt my dreams for a long time after, but more about that later. To the left and directly across from the dining room was the kitchen. It was a typical galley style kitchen with a counter, cabinets and sink to the right and refrigerator and stove to the left. Completing the first floor was what we called our “Music” room, just to the left of the front door. Upstairs too was typical of the time and style of house. A straight staircase tucked between the kitchen and music room lead up to a bathroom and three bedrooms. There was also a back section of the house downstairs that was closed off from the rest with a nailed shut door. Through the window in the door you could see that the entire area was jammed full of old furniture, building supplies and miscellaneous junk. If you looked carefully and long enough you might also catch a fleeting glimpse of a feral Calico cat darting about.

The first adventure, which I didn’t enjoy too much, was cleaning the place and making it ready to live in. Mom had always been very thorough when it came to moving-in-day cleaning and this house was no exception, probably even more so considering that it had not been lived in since who knows when. We swept, scrubbed the walls, and scrubbed the hardwood and vinyl floors on hands and knees, cleaned windows, countertops, baseboards and anything that didn’t move out of the way. But as mentioned earlier, the house was condemned and I guess we couldn’t get electricity, at least for

a while because my brother and I hauled water from the well in buckets.



When we got settled in for that first night, we had to haul water again for all the baths that had to be taken. Trudging out to the well, one of us holding a lantern, a small bucket would be dropped however many feet it was to the water and then retrieved hand-over hand and emptied into a larger bucket for transport back to the house some sixty feet away. We would haul it upstairs to the bathtub in the larger bucket, taking several trips for each tub full. Considering that there were eight of us needing baths, it was quite a long night of cold baths. Drinking water was procured the same way except that we strained it through a cheesecloth into a large metal milk can. I won't even mention the restroom process; your imagination can probably guess the most likely procedure for that. I'll just say that it was the most unpleasant task imaginable! Within a few days we did get electricity and things got better, at least until winter. For some reason we didn't have electricity for a time then either, and we were back to lanterns and hauling water.

The utility room had a creaky wooden floor and held the furnace and water heater, along with the broom, mop, and a trash can. On the surface there was nothing particularly unusual about it, but that room scared me worse than any dark corner of the house ever did.

The reason was simple, sudden, and unforgettable.

One evening my older brother and I were doing dishes. He was washing and I was rinsing and drying. Without warning a large rat burst out of the utility room, shot across the dining room floor, then across the kitchen floor, and before I could react ran straight up my leg to my thigh. From there it launched itself onto the curtain covering the kitchen window. I don't remember screaming, but I'm sure I did.



My stepdad reacted instantly. He grabbed the broom from the utility room and beat the rat to death right there in the kitchen. The whole thing took only seconds, but it burned itself permanently into my memory. From that moment on the utility room was no longer just a place for cleaning supplies and

appliances, it was where something wild and uncontrollable lived, waiting. I avoided that room whenever I could after that and when I couldn't, I never went in without keeping an eye on the doorway.

The real beauty of this place was the land. One half of a square mile of slightly rolling pastures, woods and ponds. The cattle roamed throughout the pastures at will, and except for a few, were mostly docile. We children had the run of the place and journeyed the full length and breadth of it also at will.

One of the ponds sat about in the middle of the property. It was perhaps one hundred fifty feet across each way and was sparsely surrounded by trees, some of them willows. One of the trees near the edge had fallen at some point, protruding thirty or forty feet out into the water forming a perfect little dock. Close to the end of the tree there was a little nook with an up-turned branch that was smooth and well rounded. This made for a great spot to sit and either fish, enjoy the summer sunshine or while away the hours contemplating life. It was sort of like our "Thinking Tree." The banks of this pond also served well for hunting frogs, turtles and small garter snakes. Many times, my brothers and I would come home with a pocket full of one or the other only to be scolded by mom for bringing them into the house. They generally stopped squirming around once they were in the darkness of the pocket and unless one of them popped their head out, it was easy to forget that they were there. Well at least that's what we told her. Most of the time we just wanted to scare our sisters.

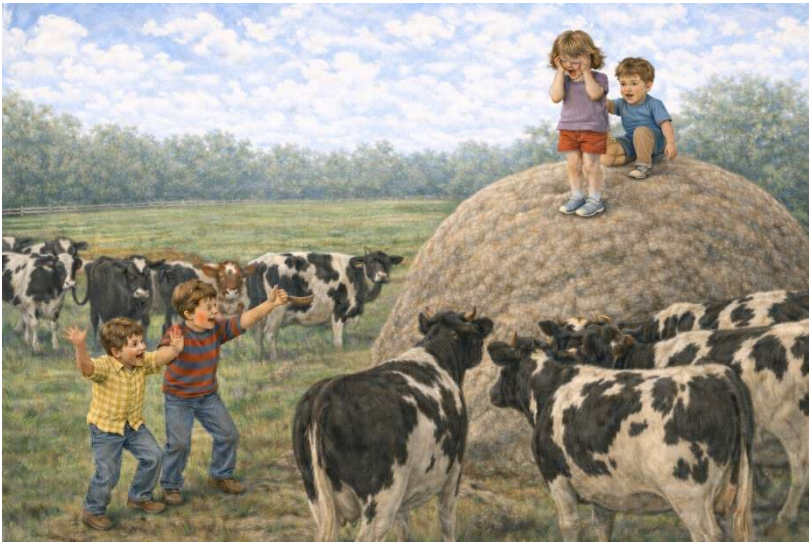
One of our favorite playgrounds was the large barn. It smelled of hay and animals; dust floated in the sunlight that slanted through the widely gapped floorboards from above. The upper-level loft had large doors that swung open over the barnyard. Below the doors was a sizable pile of hay. It may have been a hay and manure mix now that I think more about it. Anyway,

we would jump from the upper level into the pile, mostly taking turns. Sometimes we would all jump at once, landing in a big heap. Even the girls, Julie and Shelly, joined us in this activity. Davi, at only a year and a half old was too little, but only because mom said so. It was the place where we practiced aerial stunts, falling after pretending to be shot by a marauding Indian or a detective who was after our bad-guy persona. It was a regular activity and one that required no planning, no supervision, and no concern for time. It was good exercise and good clean fun, if you didn't mind the wafting odor of manure. We'd return to the house dirty, itchy, and tired, but satisfied in a way that only comes from having spent the entire day inventing our own little world.



There was also a large granite rock, more of a boulder, sitting in the side expansion of the front yard adjacent to the pasture. I don't know exactly how tall it was, but it was quite a scramble to climb to the top of it. But of course, we did play on top of it a lot. It was another of the places that was good for falling off of when pretending to be shot. We even managed to get our sisters on top of it too. Even though there was this one time...

There were a few of us playing on top, including Sister Shelly, when the cows got out of the fence again. For whatever reason they made for the base of the rock where they milled around. They seemed to be a bit riled up about something and were fidgety. We boys had to get down and work the cows back in the fence, which we actually did quite often. Shelly was afraid to get down though and just stood there on top of the rock crying. Of course being brothers, we laughed and teased her a bit, no real harm intended, just the sort of thing siblings do when the situation seems funny but not too serious. Eventually, though, the teasing stopped. We shooed the cows away and helped Shelly climb down safely. She was shaken, but unharmed, and the cows that had been lingering around watching wandered off, apparently disappointed that the show was over.



We still talk about that day sometimes when we get nostalgic. It's one of those small moments that never quite leaves you, not because anything terrible happened, but because it so perfectly captures what it was like to share a childhood filled with

freedom and mixed with just enough danger to make the memories last.

Living out in the country, we burned our trash. That job usually fell to my older brother Donnie and me. Our younger brother Mike often helped, carrying trash out to the incinerator we had set up behind the house. The incinerator itself was the shell of an old clothes dryer that had been gutted. It worked well, though sometimes we also used a burn barrel that stood nearby. Even though burning the trash was technically a chore, it never really felt like one. Fire had a way of turning work into thought provoking entertainment.

Occasionally, small fires crept out into the grass around the incinerator. Those were easily handled with some quick foot-stomping and a splash or two of water from the bucket we always kept nearby. It was all very manageable, very much under control.

One day though, on a day that in hindsight was far too blustery for burning, things went wrong. A gust of wind carried sparks farther than we expected, and suddenly the grass was burning faster and further away than we could stomp it out. Panic set in. The three of us became frantic, makeshift wildfire fighters. Urgently running, stomping, splashing water, and shouting instructions at one another that didn't help much. Although we did the best we could, it wasn't enough. Sometime during our efforts volunteer firemen arrived and eventually brought the fire under control. I don't remember who had alerted them, but I sure was relieved that they came! By the time it was out, about twenty acres of pasture had burned. I think we three had learned another life lesson; Some things will test you regardless of how old you are or how confident you feel. Fire was still fascinating, but after that day, it had earned my respect. I no longer thought of burning the trash as a form of entertainment.



As mentioned before, there were several dozen, probably seventy cows or so, along with a couple of bulls that roamed the pastures pretty much at will. Like humans, they seemed to form distinct groups that preferred each other's company. Even from inside the house your nose could tell you if they happened to be grazing the pastures on either side of the house, and the aromas were conspicuous enough that you could also generally tell which group of cows it was.

The fences surrounding the property were five-foot-tall wire fencing and not in the best condition. It wasn't uncommon for the cows to lean against them at any point until they had pushed their way through and the herd would nonchalantly wander off as cows tend to do. This was a common enough occurrence that we were all ready to jump into action to round them back up when it did. Even the younger kids might be called on to hold the ground in a certain area waving a shirt or something to "scare" the herd in a different direction while us older kids did the chasing. One such event was especially memorable.

The east side of the property was bordered by a gravel road that the school bus traveled on its way to our drop-off point in front of the house, which faced the main paved road. One afternoon after topping a small hill on this road the bus came to an unexpectedly quick halt which required all of the kids to hold on tight to prevent being thrown from the seats. Standing squarely in the middle of the road and blocking the bus were several cows that had gotten out. The startled driver began yelling and honking the horn in a frantic attempt to get them to move. This only agitated the lead cow, one that was familiar to us and known to be particularly easy to get riled up. She stood there defiantly, shaking her head and horns at the bus, unafraid of the large yellow intruder. When her efforts failed, the driver was unsure of what to do next. My brother came to the rescue with a quickly formed plan.



Donnie told the driver to let me and him off the bus and we would clear the road. He said that we would get the cows back inside the fence and walk home from there, herding the cattle along the way. He kept saying we as if he and I had formed this plan in consultation with each other! I guess he knew that I

would go along. The driver agreed to his plan and as the rest of the passengers watched from the aisle and their seats, my brother climbed off the bus.. I reluctantly followed.

Working the cows back into the pasture turned out to be quite an adventure. While we shouted, waved our arms, and circled around the herd the way we had done many times before, this was a stubborn little group, and it didn't help that they were in a restless mood. It wasn't graceful, but eventually it worked. Slowly, the cows moved back toward the fence and through the opening they had made, my brother and I following behind like two triumphant wranglers.

We were more than a little proud of ourselves. Walking home afterward, we knew that we had put on a bit of a show for the other kids on the bus and had won the respect of our driver too. It felt good to be trusted with something important, and even better to pull it off.

It was from the branches of an elm tree in the front yard where I first saw an egg hatch. One day while climbing it I noticed three tiny blue eggs in a nest that was firmly lodged in the crook of two branches of an offshoot leader branch about halfway up. The mother bird tried desperately to encourage me to leave her nest alone with all the vigor that a Robin could master and I climbed a little higher in the tree to help her feel at ease. I continued to climb that tree every afternoon after school for three weeks and sat very still in my now familiar vantage point until the day that they did hatch. It was exciting for a young fella to watch them hatch. I guess the mother bird had gotten used to me because she stood there on the edge of the nest and paid no attention to me at all. I guess you could say that I had a "Birds-eye" view of the whole thing and had a pretty good story for "Show & Tell" at school.

By the time we eventually left that old farmhouse, I don't think any of us realized just how deeply it had worked its way into our beings. It was a place that asked things of you, work, patience, courage but quietly gave back something more lasting in return. It taught us how to entertain ourselves, how to face fear without fully understanding it, how to take responsibility when things went wrong, and how to trust one another when they did. The house itself may have been condemned, drafty, and occasionally terrifying, but the land was wide open and generous, and it allowed us to continue to grow up and become "ourselves" with very little interference.

Looking back now, what stands out most isn't any single adventure, but feelings that threaded through all of them. Days felt long and unclaimed, danger felt real but manageable, and the world seemed vast without being overwhelming. We learned what our limits were, sometimes by crossing them, and we learned that mistakes didn't always end in disaster, just in lessons you carried forward. That mix of freedom and consequence, of wonder and responsibility, is something that feels rare now, and I didn't know at the time how lucky we were to have it.

That farmhouse near Lakeville is gone now, having been replaced long ago by a golf course. The only remnant is the large granite boulder standing proudly in the place that it's likely occupied for centuries. But it still exists in the stories we tell and the quiet smiles that come with them. It lives because we remember... kids climbing on a granite rock, leaping from a hayloft, hauling water by lantern light, or stepping off a school bus to face a road full of cows. It was only one chapter of our childhood, one chapter in a book, but it helps to write the rest of the book.

They are cherished memories that I'll always carry with me.