

# Editor's Perspective



By Michael L. Sensor, Esquire

## The Farm

Some say ghosts exist. Others say they can't. But, there are indeed ghosts of the mind: spirits, memories that will never leave so long as the brain functions. No measure of exorcism will drive those ghosts away, as they are part of the mind. They constantly lurk at the edge of consciousness, flickering into being at random, unbidden times—especially in the summer, when the air is still, the twilight is long, and the sunsets ochre.

The farm sits on an 80-acre plot, divided in twain by a country road, an obsidian thread linking a university town to the west with a declining industrial city to the east. The farmhouse, a few score feet back, now has hedges virtually covering the front windows, affording an impermeable barrier to the dull roar of cars and trucks driven by people on their way to tasks far more important than pondering the history and fate of the farm by which they just sped.

The original foundation of that unregarded farmhouse was built in the early 1800s, not long after my Mennonite forebears left Penn's Woods for points north, ending up in Michigan and becoming Methodists in the process. Later sections were built over the years. A huge chestnut tree in the side yard, one of its branches held up by an ingenious array of wire rope and bolts, is one of the few tangible reminders of the farm's age, because the farm is a place where time halts, where thoughts and memories of family—present and past—are held and preserved. A large shadowbox hangs on the wall of a sitting-room, bearing relics of my ancestors' honors and accolades; a faded blue-and-white Y, my Uncle Donald's letter from Ypsilanti High School; a gold anchor pin, my Aunt Helen's insignia from her service as a Navy

nurse; a Blue Star Mothers' flag bearing four stars, none of which, fortunately, ever became gold.

To the motorist, the farm was just another one of many that dotted Plymouth Road on the way to Detroit, a part of the scenery passed by without a second thought. But, for my family, we whose parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins grew up there, and who spent long, warm summer days and nights catching fireflies, watching slide shows in the family room, exploring the hayloft in the barn, taking rides on Uncle Donald's tractor, petting the horses and helping feed the cows, and fishing in the pond, the farm was a familial henge, the locus of what made us a family. Out of that clapboard two-story farmhouse and its surrounding acres of alfalfa, corn, and wheat came engineers, foresters, nurses, teachers, high-school principals—and, most importantly, beloved family members.

My family visited the farm every summer, making the five-hour trek across the southern shore of Lake Erie to Toledo, thence north to Washtenaw County. I used to sleep in my grandfather's old room when we were there, sleeping in his old open-spring bed, its itchy horsehair edging out of the seams, while my parents took the more comfortable trundle beds. They would insist on taking Grandpa's bed, but I always refused; it was both an honor and a comfort to be able to sleep in the same bed in the same room where my grandfather studied and struggled to overcome the stuttering that made him an intelligent, but shy, young man.

In the days of my great-grandfather Albert, who spoke with a thick Teutonic accent and was known to lapse into full-

fledged German when he was angry, Plymouth Road was a rutted two-lane dirt road, which, if the weather was dry and warm, would take you to Detroit in about an hour. In the 1920s, as the Michigan auto industry ramped up production, the county covered it with macadam, ultimately giving way to asphalt. Yet, that was not even enough; in the 1970s, the State of Michigan built a four-lane expressway just to the north of the farm, all the better to speed motorists from Ann Arbor to the western periphery of Detroit. Although the M-14 brought unrelenting noise to the farm and took 40 acres from the farm's original size, it did have one pleasant side effect: a giant pit the state dug on the farm for road fill turned into a huge pond stocked with all manner of fish, offering many happy fishing days to my brothers and me.

Yet, the very roads which indirectly brought happiness to the anglers in the family were nonetheless harbingers of change. Over the years, the sacred veneer that covered the farm when I was a child has begun to fade. My 98-year-old Uncle Donald, who was born in the house along with his five brothers and sisters and moved there with his wife to run the farm after his father died, now needs assistance around the house and the farm, as his sight is failing. The pigs and horses are gone, only beef cattle remaining, tended by a sharecropper. The chickens and roosters have vanished from the hen house, now filled with my uncle's vast collection of tools and agricultural implements—including a now-disused wooden camper trailer he built from plans published in *Popular Mechanics* in the 1930s. The tractors that my great-

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uncle fooled my mother into thinking were horses named "John Deere" and "Minnie Moe" (short for Minneapolis-Moline), are now slowly sinking into the dirt floor of the shed. Traffic moves by a lot faster on Plymouth Road and the M-14, and the noise from the roads makes it difficult to sleep in my grandfather's bedroom, built as it was before the days of Fiberglass insulation and Windowalls.

Housing developments have gobbled up much of the farmland nearby. One need only drive less than ten minutes to the east to reach the overdeveloped western suburbs of Detroit. Million-dollar houses dot the shores of Frains Lake, right across from them. The neighbors sometime complain about the lowing of the cows at night.

*What solemn sound the ear invades,  
What wraps the land in sorrow's shade?  
From heaven the awful mandate flies:  
The father of his country dies.*

*Where shall our nation turn its eye?  
What help remains beneath the sky?  
Our friend, protector, strength, and trust,  
Lies low and moldering in the dust.<sup>1</sup>*

Unlike many stories about the disappearing of America's farms and open spaces, this one has a happy ending. Uncle Donald turned down far more lucrative offers from developers and sold the farm to Washtenaw County for eventual development as a park, a vast open space in a rapidly developing area. He has a life estate in the house and lands, and given the longevity in our family, he may well be there for some time. I certainly hope he will, because when he leaves us, the axis of our family will precess towards another polestar—one yet to be found.

Sadly, my family's farm is the exception, rather than the rule. Even as gas prices soar to stratospheric levels, our nation continues with its hearty appetite for farmland, planting luxury homes and townhouses (*from the low \$290s!*) where oats and soybeans once grew. Even here in Delaware, even during my relatively brief

1. Traditional American folk tune, "Mount Vernon", from the "Sacred Harp" songbook used in shape-note singing, popular in New England and the Appalachians.

career, the march of progress continues unabated. When I was a new lawyer in the mid-1990s, my court appearances in Kent and Sussex Counties would take me down Route 13, the old Dupont Highway, past luscious fruit and vegetable stands, lonely country cemeteries, and stands of pine and holly. Now many of the farmers' stands are gone and the lonely cemeteries even lonelier, as beach-bound traffic hurtles over them on Route 1.

Whenever my car crests the Roth Bridge over the C&D Canal, I see fields of houses and townhomes where farms once stood, some of them seemingly popping up overnight. Further to the south, towards Smyrna and Dover, there's more of the same. I certainly don't decry the right of a property owner to dispose of land the way he or she sees fit. However, I do wonder what dreams and memories were plowed under when those farms were plowed and houses planted in the place of crops. Did their grandchildren catch glow-worms at night? Did cousins and nieces lay under the stars, looking for meteors and planets? Was the first thing they heard in the morning, lying in their beds after a night of family stories and marshmallow roasts, the cows coming through the field for their first milking of the day? Did they find glory in a shaft of sunlight filtering through the cracks in a barn's walls, illuminating motes of dust like so many stars?

Will they miss those things? Did they even know what they were? There are too many farms, too many families, to know. The ghosts of their minds will surely visit them gently in the middle of the night, just as they do with me, triggering pleasant memories redolent with the faint scent of hay, the smell of my great-aunt cooking pancakes in the kitchen, the splash of an oar in the pond, or the gentle tinkle of a cow's bell. And when the farm is gone—preserved as it may be as a park—it will be gone forever, lying "low and moldering in the dust," and I will be left only with the ghosts of my memories—the memories of my endless summer days and nights spent on that sacred patch of land in Michigan. ☪

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