

The Land that Time Forgot

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(A story about my life and my troubles with the Health Department of NW Michigan)

I've been having a good bit of trouble with the NW Michigan Health Department for over a year now. It all started when I applied for a well permit for the lakefront property I acquired from my mother a few years ago. What a colossal mistake that has turned out to be. Here's the story, but it starts long ago, before I was even born actually, when my family had...

A Station Wagon full of Kids and Our Summertime National Park Adventures

The young and growing Richard and Ellen Wolfe family all grew up enjoying a fantastic family tradition for long summertime car trips tramping around the United States and camping in tents and sleeping bags in the backyards (or sometimes backrooms) of friends and relatives of my parents, but mostly and more importantly to us kids, in National Parks everywhere we could find them. Our spectacular National Parks – the greatest adventure destinations in the world. (I felt that way as a kid (without any input from Ken Burns) and I still feel that way today.) Beautiful, exciting, enchanting – full of strange critters and friendly park rangers with wide brimmed hats who were all over the place to lead hikes and answer questions. Chipmunks, bears, rocks, huge trees, mountains, lakes, geysers, fantastic canyons – you name it, they had it. What wouldn't there be to like about them? (And even better - back then they weren't even very crowded.) So find them we did – plenty of them. Out West mostly, but we went most everywhere, to Maine, North Carolina, Florida, Arizona, California – all over the place. And we loved it – I know I sure did.

By the time I was six we had been on half a dozen of these family frenzies. Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Acadia, the Smokies, the Florida Everglades, Washington DC, Yosemite and the West Coast were all destinations which we drove to. Incredible destinations every one. We also started doing a lot of camping right here in good old Michigan – our pleasant peninsula, the Great Lake State, or the Water, Winter Wonderland as we fondly knew it by license plates of the day. Our first up north experiences were with some family friends that had a small cottage on Higgins Lake – actually not right on it, but pretty close (they have multiple rows of cottages there) – and we went there quite a bit. And my parents also found a nice campground on a lake a little further north that we started going to – Whiting Park on Lake Charlevoix. On one of those trips, they heard about some land for sale and went to see it. It was right near the campground on a tiny little dirt road called Cedar Lane. And the best part – it had a little trailer on it, and also a spartan little cottage down by the lake. Are you kidding me – a trailer and a cottage, AND our very own private beach? (Ok, you couldn't really call it a beach as there was no sand per say, but lots and lots of rocks and plenty of lake out past that.) Oh my God – this was kid heaven – two big lots, trees everywhere including the biggest birch tree anyone had ever seen, and a big, beautiful, clean, freshwater lake. We would still be camping, but we wouldn't even need tents anymore – we could sleep like kings in the summerhouse if we wanted to - which was what we called our little screened in cabin down by the lake. So we got our slice of heaven on Lake Charlevoix – and our own private camping adventure destination was just a couple of hours from home. We could visit all summer whenever we wanted to – just pile into the old Dodge Polara station wagon and hit the road up North. We were living large.

The Land That Time Forgot - The Wolfe Property on Cedar Lane

It was the summer of 1967 when my parents bought our up North property and my love affair with Lake Charlevoix started. It was in a narrow, winding dirt road called Cedar Lane in small subdivision called Tonnadoonah. I had no idea what Tonnadoonah stood for, I just knew that there was a great big sign with that word spelled out in big red letters at the top of the hill along the main road. I would eventually figure out the dark side of Tonnadoonah, but at that time it was just an oddity and an interesting word. (Tonna – rhymes with Donna, and doonah – like dune-a.) Turns out that was actually the name of the real estate development, meaning a subdivision of sorts, that was being developed by a rather unscrupulous lawyer named Ralph Bartholomew. As my father told me at some point, Mr. Bartholomew used his connections with local politicians to help chisel the land for his development away from our up-north neighbor Mr. Wilson, who happened to have a nice little cottage right next to us. He also had a whole bunch of banjos up on his wall, and once or twice when we convinced him to take one down and play, man did he ever go to town. It was hard to get him started, but even harder to get him to stop once you did. It sure was quite a show – like having our own private little Vaudeville Theater right next door. Back then on our lane it was about half cottages, and half vacant land. There were 2 houses – the Bartholomew’s creepy place, and a beautiful place a few down from us – the Fehler’s house. Those were the only two houses on the lane. Mr. Sayer who was next to us on the other side was in the process of building a big A Frame, but that project was still a few years down the road when we bought our place.

As to how Tonnadoonah got started, the way my dad told it, Mr. Bartholomew got his shady lawyer / local politician type buddies to require Mr. Wilson to have to put in a full-fledged 2 lane road for the cottages. Apparently, Mr. Wilson couldn’t afford all that so he agreed to sell all of his property to Ralph. (Probably at a cut rate price I’m guessing.) And then (as I was told) Mr. Bartholomew got his buddies to alter the restrictions again such that all that was needed was a narrow, single lane 2-track dirt road winding its way along behind the row of lakeshore lots. There may have been more to it (quite possibly involving extortion or ransom demands) but that was how the story went, and to this day, we still have a single lane road that has a few pull-overs here and there so people can carefully pass each other if two cars happen to try to use the road in opposite directions, which doesn’t happen all the time, but definitely does happen. (Invariably someone needs to back up a bit to make way. Deciding who will do that is always fun, but we manage. (I’ve never had an accident, but my guess is that someone probably has at some point.)

We bought two heavily wooded, rustic lots. For reasons unclear, Tonnadoonah was actually comprised of two “plats”. (Plat being a legal term for a “platted group of parcels” that are all neatly arranged and fully surveyed and filed with some big, important state agency that keeps track of important things like that, and possibly also what date Christmas and New Year’s will be every year. (The latter which they probably get wrong at least half of the time, but I digress.) It just so happened that our property consisted of two lots that spanned the boundary between the two plats, so we owned one lot in one, and one in the other. OK, fine, but it also turned out that one of the lots was way bigger than the other since the boundaries of the two adjacent plats were misshapen for some reason, so we had a giant one, and one runt. That was no big deal, unless you ever decide to try to sell one of them, which I eventually did, and then it turns out to be a really big deal which amounted to another ridiculous nightmare, but not with the NW Michigan Health Department, that nightmare would be lodged firmly with the Zoning

Administrator of Eveline Township. Eveline is a zoned Township by the way – you know that for certain if you arrive by road as that status is proudly proclaimed along every major road that enters the domicile: Eveline Twp – a zoned community. (Well whoopy-doo!) I’ve actually thought about attaching a small metal plate and adding the word “poorly” to a few of the signs, but so far I haven’t. (And I’ve also been told that a nickname some locals use for the Township is Evil-line Township, but again I digress.)

So, we bought our two beautiful lots, and happiness abounded. We now had an Up North adventure-land to visit every summer to run around in shorts with bare feet, go swimming whenever we felt like it, and live the rollicking life of the kids of yesteryear that everyone dreams about when they either fantasize about what their own upbringing coulda been like, or stare vacantly at a classic Norman Rockwell painting. Our own private little Disneyland all our very own, with both a camping trailer AND a cute little cottage down by the lake. By golly, we were living the American dream for real. At least partly we were.

Once I eventually figured out what the lot lines even were, much later in life, it turns out that the smaller lot was the one with our trailer on it. And it also had a stand-alone outdoor bathroom with a bona fide flush toilet and rootin-tootin, fully functional septic system of some sort. So there wasn’t much else we would ever need. No, this was no 2nd rate installation, although for some reason which only mean-spirited grown-up types could understand, Mr. Bartholomew seemed to object to our place, or to us, or probably both, as it was never entirely clear what all he objected to, but he objected to something about us, that much was made clear. He seemed to wander by now and then and as my sister recalled, “they were not happy visits”. Seems his primary target was probably our ratty old RV trailer that was undoubtedly seriously besmirching the quaint charm (and more importantly the property values) of the upscale Northern Michigan paradise he was striving to carve out, and of course to sell lot by lot, and make huge mounds of money in the process to help furnish the lavish lifestyle that he and his large family of gangly, king-of-the-hill bully kinda kids lived up there, which included a small fleet of single-seater hydroplane boats they all roared around in that eventually broke down and littered the beach down by their place, but for a third time, I digress...

I personally recall one time when I was maybe eight, the mean old over-seer walked down and talked to my father and I happened to be there so I stood by and listened. On this visit our summerhouse was the focus of his wrath – maybe because he didn’t like it, or maybe because that was where we were standing and he could see it from there. The summerhouse is a small structure of only 250 square feet (a whopping 14 x 18), but it has a poured concrete floor, was very well framed, has sturdy roof planking and a sound shingle roof that never needed to be re-roofed, (and still hasn’t to this day, which is a bit of a miracle for the shingles of that day) and very well-made screen windows that went all the way around it. The screened-in walls was all it ever had – so it was generally very windswept. On rainy nights if we were sleeping there vs in a tent, dad would generally come down and hang a giant piece of plastic over the screens on the lake side, which probably did stop the rain from blowing in, but then that generally kept us awake by blowing around all night making a crinkly ruckus all night long. But it was our quaint, breezy little cottage.

Still, nothing about our treasured little summerhouse was good enough for Mr. Bartholomew. It had to go, as he very matter-of-factly told my dad that day. It had never been properly approved – it was thrown up in one weekend he claimed. Now I have no idea if it had been approved, or what approvals were even needed way back then, but there is no way on earth you can build a

building like that in one weekend. I know this because I've built some buildings. More like a month at best. And it was also much too close to the lot line he told dad. (It turns out it wasn't, and isn't, at least by current zoning standards, but back then I'm not sure we entirely knew where the lot line actually was.) Yup, it had to go. I was horrified, but dad was cool as a cucumber, just taking it in and not saying anything. Maybe the best thing to do would be to just burn it down – get rid of it that way. That comment got my full attention. I looked at my dad, and to his credit, he still didn't respond. But why on earth would anyone threaten to burn down our beautiful little summerhouse? What form of vile ogre was this man, and no wonder his kids were such bullies. At some point after that vile but idle threat was casually leveled, the conversation petered out and Mr. Bartholomew went on his merry way, along with all of the band of cackling, winged monkeys that always traveled along with him. And good riddance at that. I don't know that I was ever in that man's presence again, and I'm sure I wouldn't have wanted to be. No one burned down our summerhouse, and I'm not sure it ever came up again, but it sure did that day, and that memory is seared deeply into the bowels of my gray matter for all eternity.

So for certain, given our family tradition for vagabond trips meandering around the country, and our relatively humble middle class means, the rustic nature of our Charlevoix property suited us all just fine. Sure there were plenty of times that we wanted a cottage, or should I say, when I did. But we had our quaint little summerhouse down by that lake, so that was our little lap of luxury. And on cold rainy days, we would often head down and visit our friends the McMurtries and would have a great, big communal spaghetti dinner with all of them and all of us packed into their place. They were a family we knew up there that also happened to live in our hometown of Midland, but we didn't really know them from there, or at least not much – we knew them from Up North. And they were great Up North neighbors. They had a real cottage, plus they had kids right around the ages of all of us, and they weren't bullies. (Our two families would add up to 13 people if everyone was there – 6 of them and the 7 of us.) And best of all, they had a fantastic cottage which Mr. McMurtrie built himself. It was incredible, very open with a slanted roof and big beams and with huge glass windows facing the lake that covered that entire wall. (For decades I designed versions of their cottage as one that I fantasized about having for our family. Fact is I still harbor a version of that fantasy, but that's another story.)

So we had our place on the lake and a teensy sorta-cottage to go with it, and the old trailer that mostly my parents used, but sometimes we'd all pack in for a meal or sleep there on air mattresses on the floor if it was cold out. (We had lots of air mattresses. Sometimes they didn't leak, but mostly they did. You'd blow it up every night before you went to bed and in the morning your butt would be on the ground. All part of the deal.) And right next to the trailer was the first-rate outdoor bathroom with the real-live flush-toilet. The one big fly in the ointment was that we never had a well, so not only did we have to cart drinking water up from home whenever we visited, we also had to lug big, huge buckets of water from the lake to flush the toilet. They sure seemed big to me when I was a little kid, I'll tell you that for sure. It used to hurt my arms to carry the darn things. But carry them I did. Lots of them. I would generally take many trips with the smaller of the two and fill it all that way. If the back of the toilet and both buckets were empty, it would take me about 6 trips to fill toilet reservoir, the big bucket, and finally the small one. "You should carry two at once", my father would say, "that will balance the load better." Right, sure thing - was he nuts? For starters the big one was way more than I could handle, but even if I could, I'd probably stumble into quick-sand half way up the hill and with a load like that it would be curtains for sure for one hard-working 7 year old kid.

So – the bathroom bucket brigade was part of the family tradition, born out of pure necessity, but ostensibly one that built character, and possibly also longer, stretched out arms. It seems that when you're raised by cautiously frugal, Depression-era adults, nothing comes easy – not even flushing the toilet.

Skipping forward most of 50 years to about 10 years ago when my parents were both still alive, but aging, and my father was struggling to carry buckets of water, I installed a lake-water pumping system and a small (rain-barrel) cistern so he didn't have to do that anymore. That job was an adventure by itself. Like my father, I got a degree in engineering, so taking on things like that was something I was trained for. I remember when I first brought up the idea with some buddies of mine at work. All real work stopped and an intense half hour design session on the lake water pumping system commenced. If we could have poured that much mental energy into whatever actual work project we had to conquer, we could have made prolific process and probably raised the price of Ford stock in the process. Somehow work projects didn't quite generate that level of enthusiasm, but that day I got a nice design for my pumping system worked out. It took a lot of hard work to install the pipe from the lake up to the cistern, and some tinkering to get it to work right. It was a real Rube Goldberg system as my dad zealously proclaimed it, but work it did. What a relief that was when I finally got it all working. It had gotten to the point my parents could only go up there when I was there since in his mid-80s, dad couldn't manage the load of the buckets any more.

In the process we also decided it was high time to do some maintenance to the septic system. The old tank wasn't able to be pumped out properly it seems, and that necessary chore finally needed to be done. Finding the darn thing was a bit of a trick, but with a steel tape measure, a shovel and some hard work we found it. My dad wanted to get a contractor to get it pumped out, and at some point it was decided that it would be better to simply swap out the old tank with a new one. It was a lot of work to find and get down to it just to start on the necessary work of getting it pumped out, so we figured if there was any time to do some preventative maintenance work, right then was the time to do it.

It took some effort but at the time I didn't think much of doing it – the new tank would be better suited for the regular excavation work needed to open it up for regular cleaning, so we did it. My father and I were both career engineers (dad worked for Dow for 37 years and I worked for Ford for 33) so doing maintenance work was a part of our professional training. But as I now know, it seems what we did was tantamount to heresy for the friendly, hard-working civil servants that work at the Health Department. In fact, I'll bet these good-natured champs sit around and smile at each other and whistle and eat crackers with some fancy pate dip and generally enjoy their cushy, tax payer funded life. Right up until they hear about someone doing unauthorized maintenance work on a septic system – then their blood runs cold and they quickly grow pointy ears while their claws and fangs pop out – at least I think that's what happens.

Now I can't say for sure, but while all of the work on our bathroom was being done, I'll bet somebody at the Health Department was sitting around eating a yummy cracker but abruptly horrified to see dense hair spontaneously sprouting like grass on his forearms from somehow innately knowing that somewhere out there in their jurisdiction, some well-meaning jerk with glasses and a pocket protector was doing the devil's work, and by God when he found them, he would make darn sure they would rue the day they toyed with the good people of the Health Department of Northwest Michigan and dared to perform unauthorized maintenance work on an

unregistered septic system. (Pocket protectors wouldn't protect those lambs from what they had coming – no sir.)

And here the story takes its second, post-Bartholomew era not-so-happy turn - my aging father died abruptly just after we got all of that work done, so he never got to use the place with the improved bathroom system we implemented. That made me very sad. And without her husband of 67 years along with her, my mother lost her desire and was no longer interested in visiting up North, so she stopped coming up as well, which was even sadder. Even in our heyday we never used the place all that much - generally only on a few weekends in the summer – Memorial Day and Labor Day for sure, and usually a week or two in August, often without dad on those weeks, and now we used it even less. At this point it had lost a good deal of its youthful luster – all of it actually. But it was still my field of dreams - the place that we frolicked and played, keeping one eye out for Bartholomew bullies, and one for frogs we could try to catch. (When we caught them, we didn't kill them, but *they* sure did.)

Meet Eveline Township

As we slowly approach the present day in this trying tome, after I took over the family property 5 years ago, I decided it was high time to make some upgrades to the land that time forgot. There were a number of things that I had wanted to do that my father wouldn't let me do. In fact the lake water pumping system was roundly nixed by him initially, as was nearly every other project I eagerly suggested. But on that one I was so fed up with having to carry buckets of water to flush the toilet that I told him that if he didn't let me make that upgrade to put in the lake water pumping system, I was going to stop coming all together. And I meant it. And he could tell. "Well if that's how you feel about it, then go ahead," he said in a matter-of-fact but obviously displeased tone. I was kinda playing dirty pool, since it had gotten to the point that my parents wouldn't be able to come up there much by themselves without my help with buckets and other things, so I for that had him over a barrel and we both knew it, but that was what it took to get him over the hump on that one.

What I had in mind for upgrades to our Charlevoix property was nothing too drastic, but enough to finally, hopefully, make it more comfortable to visit for someone who was no longer a kid, or a young man, or even a middle-aged man. Getting a roof over my boats at long last was my top priority, and maybe also the small shed I'd always wanted to I could keep a couple of bicycles up there and not have to cart them back and forth whenever I wanted to use one. So I started working at it. I had been trying to get stuff like this approved through the Township zoning administrator for years, and by golly by hook or by crook, I finally did. It took a combination of patience, persistence, luck. Plus having sued the Township previously and winning the suit probably helped.

The history there was that I previously had to work through some serious difficulties with the Township to get approval to shift the lot line between our two properties so that I could sell one of them, which I had recently done. That required a lot of leg work looking up zoning information, paying good money to a number of different lawyers, and eventually taking the Township to court, which I did, and I won. The main reason it was so hard was due to the shape of our lots and the fact that they straddled the two plats I had previously mentioned. Plus at some point after we bought our property, they had altered the standards by which lakeside lots could be parceled out. It used to be they allowed 70 foot wide lots, and in fact the lots on

the lane to the east of us were like that, but now they required a 100 foot wide lot, and all of the lots to the west of us were of the more modern 100 foot size. But they also now required all of the lots to be at least 200 feet deep such that they would be at least 20,000 square feet in size, and almost none of the lots on our lane met that requirement.

And our two lots didn't either, or so it seemed, but by pure chance, our misshapen, trapezoidal shaped, larger lot had just enough size that it actually just barely met the 20,000 square foot requirement, so even though almost no other lots on our lane did, this particular misshapen lot of ours did, and by God the Zoning coordinator I had to deal with wasn't about to let me reconfigure things to equalize our two lots in size and in the process make the larger one, which was technically a "conforming lot" be turned into another ugly, little non-conforming lot, like all of the neighbors had. I have no idea why that was such a big deal, but it was to this irascible old coot. You'd think that there was some giant Zoning Hall of Shame somewhere that would have pictures hung like they used to do for wanted men in post offices, naming all of the sad-sacks who allowed a conforming lot to be changed into a non-conforming one. The mere thought of it was inconceivable for this particular fella, even if it made no rational sense to defend a standard that most all of the properties on the lane didn't meet.

And in fact as it eventually turned out, that was the key point that allowed me to prevail in court, but as I have come to very painfully discover, most Government employees in enforcement roles such as a Zoning Administrator (or Environmental Department Supervisor) don't much excel in rational thinking, or human compassion either for that matter. But give them some rule typed out neatly in a code book and a big stick to swing and they will defend it to the death. Like a bear guarding her young, there is no reckoning with such people. It's an instant, unavoidable, instinctive grudge match that wells up like a snarl in the throat of a wild beast. Someone will live, and someone will die. And unless you are sharp, determined, have a good lawyer or are a really good shot, the person that's gonna die is you. (I relied mostly on the second item on the list. I've been known to beat my head on the wall over and over, well-past when any normal person would have long since given up.)

So in addition to having already worked for years to try to get approval for the pole barn, I had been through the ringer with these territorial critters before with my line lot shift. The deal on this latest tussle is that according to the stingy bastards in the Township who sit down over beer and write down lots of rules (which they then proceed to inflict on their neighbors and proclaim their prowess on area road signs), our modest accommodations didn't stack up as a bona fide residence by their standards, and according to their esteemed zoning ordinances, you aren't allowed to build an accessory structure until you plop down enough of your dough to put up a proper primary structure first. The shrewd rationale for that is entirely, wholly and completely exists as a massive, unethical (in my opinion) money grab - don't allow some gomer like me the right to create a place to store his toys until he ponies up a pile of his hard-earned money first to build a home and in the process triple the annual tax bill for them to feed off of. That's what it's all about - mullah, "mean-green", blood money, whatever you want to call it, but being forced to punch your ticket and pay through the nose to do it. I have no idea how such a system is legal, or constitutional even, and I sure don't think it should be, but apparently it is.

But the red-tape sea finally miraculously parted, I finally got my precious pole barn zoning permit approved. And best of all, this time I prevailed without any litigation and more money dumped into Beelzebub's bucket of blood (or my lawyer's pocketbook - same difference). With that, and a lot of work, at long last I could actually keep the rain and snow off the boats we kept

there and also store a motorcycle and a pair of mountain bikes up there in my fancy, new little shed. It was a miracle. (I'll bet if I put a sheet over my motor bike an image of it would slowly be burned into the fabric.) I had wanted to build a small shed decades ago but my father immediately poo-pooed the idea. "We don't want another roof up here to maintain." That was exactly what he said. Given that the roof of our summerhouse has lasted for so many years past it's expected life, that seemed a bit odd, but as I eventually came to discover, he did do a fair amount of work on that roof every summer. He'd climb up and carefully scrap off all of the moss that would invariably start growing from the gaps between the shingles where gunk would collect. For him, anything built was something more to maintain, and keeping that work to a minimum was a very staunch goal of his, so the shed never happened. Plus as it turned out where I wanted to put it was right smack-dab in the middle of the aberrant lot line between our two lots, so until I got that straightened out, I couldn't have done it anyhow, but I didn't know that back then.

I also got a slick new PVC dock replacing the 4 section wooden one that had been handmade by my father and myself (he had 2 sections and I added 2 more) and I bought a new (used) speed boat, fixed up my hoist with new rails and cables and I even upgraded the old family trailer as well. My parents had upgraded the trailer once before, but that was around 40 years ago, and after a few decades, it was starting to get dilapidated and unsightly. After all of that work, the final upgrade I wanted to implement after all these years (55 now) - was to finally put in a well so I could stop having to lug drinking water up to the property every time I visit, so I went into the Health Department and filed a permit for a well. The lake water pumping system had taken care of half of the problem, and a well would take care of the other half. We'd finally have fresh clean drinking water, right out of the ground, and for free, just like everyone else! Oh what a beautiful concept and what a wonderful delight that would be – or so I thought.

What a huge nightmare it has turned out to be, making it clear what a big mistake it was to doubt my father's voracity on this one. The sharp claws and blood-thirsty fangs of those generally amiable NW Michigan Health Department employees were quickly dug into my succulent, white underbelly with full ferocity as I was methodically torn to shreds while they danced on their hind legs and howled with delight – or at least I think that's the way it went. It's hard to say for sure, because it's tough to get a good look at them if you happen meet up face to face, since as they say, you never want to look a wild animal directly in the eye. Doing that can spook 'em even more, and you definitely don't wanna do that to one of these critters if you can help it.

When I was younger but equally stupid it seems, I had asked my father about getting a well several times. He always declined, and said we didn't need one. That frustrated me, but it was their place, and if they wanted to keep it in an old-fashioned Hooverville type manner, that was their prerogative. But my father also made it abundantly clear he didn't want anything to do with the Health Department. He told me that if we filed a permit, they would be sure to come out and inspect everything, and it seemed that he was afraid that they might try to force us to stop using the trailer and the septic system for whatever reasons they would conjure up, so he steered way clear of ever trying to get a well and having to reckon with the people of the Health Department. Keeping things as they are and staying the heck away from people like that, irrational people with unbridled power, was clearly his mindset. It just wasn't worth it, and at his age at the time, I could see his point.

Plus as I finally came to understand, as frustrating as it was to me to come to grips with, our Charlevoix property was "***the land that time forgot***" for my parents and they both very much enjoyed the simplicity of it and also the feelings it brought them with the memories of having a young family as they did when we bought the place. Change can suck, and so can dealing with bullies, and they didn't want to be bothered with any of that up there any more than we already had been. On top of that they didn't have the energy for all of the rigmarole needed to work through the approvals and road blocks in place to prevent trailer trash like us from enjoying our life up there in the in the unbridled fashion that the big-boy cottage people could. So keeping it all as it was then was both financially practical and important to them for sentimental reasons. And at this point, it also has become somewhat that way to me it seems. ("Oh for the love of God, NO!" I can hear the neighbors bellowing, the legion of doom is self-perpetuating! Yup, you got that right buckwheat.)

The Well Permit Form Hell (Forgive me father, for I have sinned...)

But after all of the work I did with the upgrades I had gotten completed so far, I felt finally getting a well would be the right thing to do, and would be the final piece of the puzzle to transform my property into a trailer park paradise. I would finally have accommodations equal to a KOA campground. Those were swanky places that we couldn't afford to stay at when we took all of our family trips we took when I was growing up. But I could now, at least at Charlevoix I could, so I started working on it. It seems I was full of stupid pride, or over-confidence, or some malady from having taken on the Township, not once, but twice, and prevailed. Justice would prevail, or so I so romantically thought, so I decided it was time to get me one of those fancy water wells, just like the big boys had.

When I dug into some of the details, what I found out was that any septic system had to be at least 100 feet from the lake. I took measurements, and ours was - just barely, but it was, so that was OK. I also found out that our "grandfathered" rights to continue to use a trailer on the property were not limited to the exact trailer originally in place there - that we had a grandfathered **usage** right, not tied to any specific trailer. So both of the things that my father was so frightfully concerned with turned out not to be anything to worry about - or at least so I thought (hint, hint). So in August of 2021, I put on my best gumpie smile and blundered in to the Health Department office in Charlevoix, wrote out a check for \$346 dollars and filed a permit for a well. All of the naive happiness I still possessed that I could fit in with a highly gentrified neighborhood simply by being an upscale KAO type of trailer trash quickly crumbled away. By God what a nightmare I started. I had no idea what a narrow-minded set of meanies the Health Dept. people could be, and it turned out that my father had been entirely 100% correct to avoid all human contact with them.

Welcome to the NW Michigan Health Department

The first thing I found out was that my father had never registered our septic system with them. As a serious understatement, that is not good from the perspective of the Health Department's enforcement minded folk. More accurately, it was like getting being on Treasure Island and being handed a black spot – a certain kiss of death. I'm not entirely sure if like me, my father didn't know that anything like that had become a requirement at some point in the past number of decades after we started our highfalutin, hillbilly style run on the lake. When that requirement was codified isn't entirely clear, but it most likely would have been long after our dedicated little

system was installed in the late 50s or early 60s – back when on any given summer day you could still find prehistoric pterodactyls soaring majestically about on Lake Michigan's typical afternoon breeze.

My brief but intense relationship with the NW Michigan Health Department has definitely left me a lot less enthused about the value of government service than I could be. In fact I have conjured up a possible motto for them. (It's good, but I don't expect them to actually use it.)

Service with a smile! (Even if that service is undercutting some sorry gomer's constitutional rights wielding our code book in one hand and a bull whip in the other.) I'm pretty sure they are all required to have a functional proficiency with those types of implements – likely mastering those is covered early in their apprenticeship, or indentured servitude, or whatever bond induces decent people to align with organizations like that. I also imagine they go to local trailer parks for weekly whoop-it-up practice sessions – or maybe not - but it certainly makes sense to me that they would.

To cut to the chase on this latest, gut wrenching, ill-conceived debacle, it took a month or so after I filed the well permit, and eventually a Health Department rep. came out to check things out (and may or may not have ridden in on the back of a dragon, I didn't witness that part), and what they saw must have shocked them seeing what looked like a brand-new, shiny little travel trailer parked there and connected to a pipe going right into the ground. And since they had no record of a registered septic system, they figured that it was possible that there was no septic system in place whatsoever. (Eee gads – that could just be a 4" PVC pipe stuck right down into the ground!) Given that they didn't make one single solitary effort to contact me and actually do something like, let's see how shall I word this complicated concept, communicate like civil human beings, possibly by means of, oh I don't know, say, talking on the phone, I have no good idea how else they would have made an accurate determination if there was or wasn't a renegade system in place there or not. (Observing that there was an exposed clean-out and a vent maybe, but details like that are probably lower on the training list than learning to ride dragons and mastering the best technique for deftly snapping ice-cream cones from the dirty fingers of trailer-park children's hands with the swift lash of trusty a bull whip.)

I suppose I can see how they might have thought what they did, and after making a number of visits (three - and never contacting me even once) they went ahead and issued a public report indicating the issues they found and what they obviously didn't, that being a beautifully large, perfectly compliant, fully registered septic system. To sooth their wounded pride that we would have the audacity to utilize an unregistered septic system, they immediately slapped me with a Cease & Desist order to stop me from using my wee-little trailer with the non-compliant or possibly non-existent septic system – either way on that didn't matter to them, being that it was unregistered. This made me quite sad that they behaved in such an abrupt manner making such rash assertions without even bothering to try talking to me first, since I had tried a number of times trying to contact them after I had filed the well permit. It seems that they must have thought they had finally caught an egregious ne'er-do-well red-handed and they decided to throw the book at me right then and there, which they darn sure did, and I'll tell you what, it had some mustard on it. (I can't say for sure, but I'll bet their dragon belched out a good fire-breathing dose of skin-searing flames in savory anticipation of a very welcome upcoming meal of scorched human flesh.)

What I am certain of is what I heard them say, that, "It might take multiple agencies to enforce all of the violations on the Wolff property!" Which was a vociferous statement made during a review board meeting I attended last December by the supervisor of the health agent that performed the inspection. Even a review board member challenged him on that outlandish statement – "evaluating a septic system for a variance is purely an internal Health Department matter" one board member responded, "We don't need any other agencies to short this out." "It's just a statement," was snorted in reply. They didn't (and still don't) seem capable of conceiving that while our situation was rather unusual, it was actually legitimate and fully legal as a "grandfathered" legacy usage situation, but albeit with an unregistered septic system. On that scorn-filled topic I will add that I certainly had no idea there was any such requirement. I don't know if my father was aware of it either. I doubt he was, and I can't say for sure, but I do know that he wanted to avoid the Health Department's goon squad at all cost as a general rule, since he didn't seem to trust them and probably felt pretty certain that similar to Mr. Bartholomew (and the other equally pugnacious Tonnadoonah overlords that came after him) they would give him trouble one way or the other.

Boy, was he ever right on that one. People that become managers there must be the type of kids that as children would break the square peg / round hole learning game every time they played with it. They'd simply smash the darn thing by pounding the square peg in to the round hole with a great big hammer. (They'd also have unusually strong forearms.) I can hear the kindergarten teacher saying to her aid: "Oh look at that Judy, did you see the way little Johnny broke the peg board again by pounding the square peg right into the round hole. It looks like we have another future Health Department manager on our hands." "Oh my, his 'fully-compliant' mother will be so proud!" (At which point they both smile and nod at each other and watch the thrashing child continue to vigorously pound square pegs into round holes with a rapturous smile on his face.)

Ok, I'm again veering off course down a slightly over-dramatized rabbit hole, but the truth of the matter is, every sentiment I'm alluding to is pretty much exactly how I feel. It sure doesn't appear to me that these people can see the forest for the trees. But the unregistered trees that are inappropriately dropping their non-compliant leaves all over the place without first attaining the required authorizing paperwork blessed by the Health Department of northwest Michigan - I'm pretty sure they can see that part very clearly. Probably even with their eyes closed by just breathing in deeply with their dorsal fin aligned perfectly upright above them, ominously breaking the surface of the water as they instinctively glide towards their next meal.

How this will all play out remains to be seen. At this point it has been made very clear to me that I have 3 options, 1) disconnect my trailer from the septic system (and better yet, remove the damn thing from my property entirely); 2) take them to court to try to get a Judge to override their demands of giving up the Sudanland and Austria (whoops, hang on, wrong list of demands); 3) present them with an acceptable shrubbery – no wait, I mean churn up mother earth and stuff in a gigantic 1000-2000 gallon septic tank and equally over-sized drain field – all to service the modest needs that the humble but proud little system we have in place now fully satisfies. So that's the part that leaves me short – they are making what could seem to be well-intended but entirely over-wrought (and in my mind irrational) demands based on the behavior and lifestyle of someone that has been living quietly for decades without any trouble, and certainly with no health concerns regarding sewage disposal from our tidy little, antiquated (small but mighty!) onsite septic system.

I am also someone who's family's lifestyle doesn't (and never did) meet with the approval of the Tonnadoonah tyrants that are all up in arms and making a big fuss about all of this stuff and telling me that "I don't live up to Tonnadoonah standards" based on some dusty old deed-restrictions that they unearthed that indicates no trailer usage is acceptable (which contradicts modern zoning), so that puts me, and a few others on the lane, in violation of a set of restrictions that actually pre-date zoning, and have never been enforced, (I'm not at all clear that my parents were ever made aware of them, I just know that I wasn't) and are apparently being considered for selective enforcement – against me and me only. But that is a whole other sad story of aggressive, anti-social behaviors by a totally separate group of people – some neighbors of mine who have become inspired and further stirred up by the Health Department and their dealings with me regarding our dreary old septic system that has suddenly become such a hot topic of intense interest up and down Cedar Lane. ("Raw sewage might be going into the lake!" one hysterical person was inspired to blurt out at the last Tonnadoonah meeting I had the pleasure of enduring in July of 2022.)

Nope, nothing like that is, has, or ever will happen – not based on my property anyhow**, but that is the exactly kind of reaction that was seemingly intentionally stirred up on the neighborhood by my friends at the Health Department. (Oh those poor, privileged, frustrated people that have to weather the distain and dishonor of having someone like me live alongside them – right in their midst - right near them, way to close for comfort. (Not sure what a comfortable distance would be – behind bars in jail or at a zoo possibly.) Oh those poor people. If only they could get the Health Department to act like a giant fly swatter – trailer trash swatter more accurately - all their troubles would be solved, everyone would be happy and their world would smell like pine trees again, not raw sewage. (**The Tonnadoonah neighborhood's collectively managed sewage system on the other hand, that has been known to freeze up some cold winters, so that system might be at significant risk of a serious failure, but then, that's not my problem, thank goodness.)

So if you want to know how I feel about it all, I think I've spelled things pretty clearly. And what I know all too well to be true in life in these times is that low-life schmucks like me trying to cling to their moss-covered rights tend to get steam-rolled by the up-and-comers that want progress to occur in a way they agree with and at a rate that suits their deep pockets and equally short tempers. But you can't please everybody in life, so it's probably best I stick to trying to please myself, which isn't all that easy either, but once in a while I eke out a win that way. Just what I will do now and how things will shake out remains to be seen. Something's gotta happen. Until then I'll just keep on going, trying to enjoy those warm summer days when the sun is shining, a nice breeze blows in off the lake and I can lay back on a deck chair and watch seagulls sailing motionless to and fro up in the sky. In fact, if you squint your eyes just so, they almost look like extinct pterodactyls soaring gallantly above the land that time forgot.

-Halsey Wolff (formerly Hal Wolfe, son of Richard and Ellen Wolfe)