

MICHIGAN MAN NEWSLETTER

February 1, 2004

Hey All,

Happy February. Had enough, yet? I have been shoveling snow for, it seems half my life. Gotta do the deck today before it thaws, caves in and takes off the side of the house. Then it's up on the roof and around the skylights before it dams up and floods the attic (again). After that it's a new cable for the snow blower before this latest front moves in on Monday and Tuesday. Bent (yeah, bent!) one of the snow shovels so I gotta go to the hardware store for a new one. First I gotta shovel the driveway out by the road. County truck left a rampart when it went by. The driver is an ex-student of mine from Wolverine. I must've flunked him. Dug my old Carhart one piece out. Gained a few pounds. I feel like sausage meat stuffed in a casing when I'm out shoveling. Folks up for a little little winter recreation? Try snow shoveling!! Come on over. Hell with at ice fishing, skiing and snowmobiling. This'll make you appreciate the other five .. four two and half months of the year.

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Well, I couldn't decide on a theme. I thought maybe love and the ongoing battle of the sexes in honor of Valentine's Day so maybe I'll throw in a joke or two. But winter and the weather seems to be the topic du jour, every du jour. I've included a short story I wrote for the Resorter about five or six years ago. It's on my website (www.mikeridley.com) and has been reprinted in the Great Lakes Mariner a couple of times. Hope I'm not being overly redundant (?)

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Let's kick off the month with a song. Sung to the tune of "My Favorite Things" it's...

"Ice Fishing Things"

Tear drops and wax worms and warm woolen mittens
Beer farts in Carharts my cheeks are frost bitten
Winter is here I'm ice fishing today
my stogies are keeping the skeeters away

Blue gills and crappies and perch they are teasin'
oh-oh I just caught a bass out of season
I'm being checked out by the DNR cops
they'll let me go for some peppermint schnapps
Perch are dandy but ginger brandy makes me feel so fine
and when I remember those ice fishing things
I think I'll go drop a line

Gas powered augers and heated ice shanties
I'm wearing a pair of polar fleece panties
Poking around gonna cut me hole
just a reminder don't eat yellow snow
Pick ups and tip ups make ice fishing simple
Rapalas and jigs a new swedish pimple
driving my truck out across Mullet Lake
praying to God that the ice it don't brake
Hear the guys shout, there's white out
someone sunk their sled
and when I remember those ice fishing things
i think I'll just stay in bed

(special thanks to Bob and Anders Garner for their contribution to the lyrics)

Okay, Valentine's Day joke.

A farm couple walks into a fancy restaurant to celebrate Valentine's Day. They sit down and the waiter says, in very prim and proper manner, "Your order, please?"
The man says "I'll have the biggest, juiciest steak ya got."
The waiter, pale and aghast, says, "Sir! What about mad cow?"
(You can see this one comin')
He responds, "She can order what she wants."

Settle down. Turnabout.

So they finish dinner and head outside to the pick-up truck. Being the gentleman, he opens the passenger side door and helps her up and into her seat. He makes an aside, "Jeesh, hon! Yer gettin' as wide as four row corn picker." Her jaws get tight and of course, she doesn't say a word.
When they get home he starts hinting around that it might be a good night for int-ma-see. She gives off a disgusted snort and says, "Hah!! If you think I'm gonna fire up an eighty-thousand dollar machine for a half an ear of corn, yer crazy!"

Ah, love. Ain't it grand? Yup, and divorce is a hundred grand.

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Books.

I had a few replies, thanks to you folks. I'll withhold your full names to protect you from the ire if they turn out to be lemons, but I suspect they will be well received and I'll absorb all the credit. Don't thank me.

"Skipping Christmas" by John Grisham (from Mike and Denise in metro Detroit)
"Sleeping with the Devil" by Robert Baer (from Judy in Chicago)
"The Keeper's Son" by Homer Hickman (from Don and Sharon in Indian River)

Some of you know my passion for basketball and I would be remiss if I didn't tell you to read Pat Conroy's "My Losing Season." It's not for everyone but it is one I plan on adding to my library. (Those are the books I don't color)

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Schedule

February

5,12,19,26 (Thursdays) at Dick O'Dow's in Birmingham 9-1
13 & 14 (Fri & Sat) Douglas Lake Steak House 231.539.8588 7-10
15 (Sun) Buckhorn Inn in Trout Lake 7-11 (906) 569.3392

14 & 28 (Sat) Nubs Nob 3-6
20 & 21 (Fri and Sat) Side Door Saloon in Petoskey 9-1
231.347.9291
6 & 27 (Fri) Hoops in Auburn Hills 9-1

March

4, 11, 18 (Thursdays) Dick O'Dow's in Birmingham
5, 19, 20 Hoops in Auburn Hills
12 Hotel Doherty in Clare (St. Paddy's Day Party)
13 Thunder Bay Resort in Hillman (another St. Paddy's Day gig!)
26 Perry Hotel in Petoskey 7:30-11:30

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BACKROADS

I feel so blessed and fortunate to be doing what I'm doing. Of course, many of you have

listened to me whine about a new career where I didn't have to drive all over hell's half acre. But the folks I've met and the places and towns I've visited never cease to impress and enhance my appreciation for our great state and it's people.

I spent a weekend this past month in Hillman entertaining at the Thunder Bay Resort. The first night was a benefit to raise money for a handicap accessible play area they are building in town. Notwithstanding the tremendous amount of money that was raised in one evening, I was duly impressed with the community spirit and deep sense of commitment to this project that everyone shared. Congratulations to the little town of Hillman.

The next day, having a few rare discretionary hours to myself, I took off toward Posen in search of the "SINKHOLES!!" I'd heard of them but I had to see them. After driving between them a few times a rural circular paper delivery boy (no lie, that's what he was!) pointed out the big signs that read "Bruski Sink Hole and Stevens Twin Sinks." They were right by the side of the road. I was kinda looking off into the field for some canyons. Strapping on my snow shoes I traipsed around the depressions for a half hour or so. It was impressive, the sheer drop down about eighty to a hundred feet. But I wanted to see something a little more expansive so I meandered the back roads from Leer to Royston then finally over to M-33 south of Onaway. It was almost noon and the sun had broke through sending the mercury skyrocketing from about -15 to just above zero. It felt like a heat wave. Again, I strapped on my shoes and took off on the foot trail carved out and maintained by the Department of Natural Resources. It was roughly a mile and a half around the double sink and to be honest, I think I've discovered a new favorite tromping ground. To stand at one of the observation decks and look down on the tops of pine trees covered with fresh snow ... it was breathtaking. But so was the cold and the exertion as many of you who have done some snow shoeing understand. But it was beautiful!! It was still so cold every step seemed to crack the air. There were signs of deer and elk tracks that led down into the sinks, too steep for me but somewhere down there was Wapiti, looking up at me.

I circled back down a trail that divided the two holes and in retrospect it would've been much easier to go in the opposite direction, most of the trip being a gentle slope as opposed to a white knuckle grip, slip and slide up the incline. Having herringboned the rise I took a few more deep breaths and scanned the vista. Northeast Michigan, specifically Montmorency County is the most thinly populated area in lower Michigan (the sinks are actually in Presque isle County just north of the county line) and I stood there for a few minutes just enjoying the silence. No snowmobiles (at least for a minute or two), no cars or trucks, jets or sirens or any other audible waste from civilization. Abraham Mazlow termed it a "peak moment" when something strikes you so deeply as to come to some sort of revelation, maybe an epiphany. I will always thank God I'm still not too jaded to enjoy what is still out there in front of me. The beauty of nature, the simplistic existence of pre-millennial development that reveals itself in solitude and silence ... then .. a Yamaha, or a Polaris, maybe an Articat brought me back to reality. Time to move on. But for a moment, I was somewhere else and I couldn't tell you where, or when. But I am going back. Soon, I am going back.

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Winter can bring out the best and worst in people, or as Red Green says, ‘it is the winter of our discount tents..’ I don’t know where he was going, but I know what he meant. In any event, here is a short story about Old Man Winter.

MAKING A CASE FOR WINTER

The four seasons sat sullenly in the section reserved for the accused.

Spring, Summer and Autumn had all appeared as a show of moral support for their ancient uncle, Old Man Winter but the case against the old man was a good one and the Citizens of the North were thirsty for blood. They had had it up to the trap door of their union suits with the harsh treatment they had received winter after painfully long winter and now it was time for justice. The courtroom was soaked in anger and frustration and a mob mentality had the officers of the court on edge. The Citizens of the North had come to the township hall with one common goal: to see the old man run out of town once and for all.

The job of defending him had fell on my shoulders and being new to the North the rest of the staff ducked this case until I naively came forth and volunteered. I had always liked the old guy and had no real beef against him so I found it an unobjectionable task.

Spring sat there in his muddy boots. One cuff of his trousers was tucked into his sock and the other sat crumpled around the top of his unlaced Sorel. His long limbs seemed naked and tree like, somewhat out of place as he uncrossed his arms and blew his perpetually runny nose. He called it a transitional cold, one that sprung from too many temperature changes. His cheap Hawaiian shirt was open at the neck by two buttons, as if he wasn’t freezing in the presence of Old Man Winter and he had somewhere to go to beat the cold. Funny thing about this gangly looking fellow. In spite of his slovenly appearance and oversize structure he held a certain promise or potential of better things to come and when he stood up he always looked shorter than when he was seated. Then again, Spring (or Bud as the others called him) always seemed longer than he actually was.

Old Man Winter gazed over his shoulder at the three knowing full well they were all in cahoots but he would take the blame if he had to. He winked at Summer.

Ah, Summer. Her bare shoulders were tanned from her days at the beach and her blond streaked hair was pulled up into a pony tail and hung over the back of a golf visor. She was perpetual youth and the Citizens loved her. However, If one looked closely, gnats, mosquitoes and deer flies could be seen buzzing around her beautiful countenance and sometimes her breath fairly dripped with the humidity. When she cried, it was usually soft and gentle but without a warning she could turn into a full fledged raging torrent. Luckily that was only when she was too close to Spring or Autumn. She glanced affectionately at Autumn

Autumn was, as usual, decked out in beautiful bright colors. His powerful physique was that of a hunter. If ever the Creator had epitomized a man’s man it would, without a doubt, be Autumn. The air of Autumn was the essence of existence. Unlike Spring as the

harbinger of Summer it had a separate freshness that inspired and energized all who would partake of it.

However, in spite of his strength and power he exuded a certain sadness. It was almost fatalistic in a knowledge of impending loss. The death of all that is green and warm. The end of life itself. But he carried his sadness with dignity and it served the Citizens of the North year after year to take note of his demeanor and digest it as if it were the perfect teaching metaphor for keeping life in perspective.

The gavel sounded as the Judge was seated. It would be a bench trial not requiring a jury for at this late date no impartial Citizens could be found. The prosecution began its case and immediately began citing instance after instance of power outages, school closings, hazardous travel, and astronomically high utility bills. People were fed up with him showing up in October and not leaving until May. Even his appearance offended them. With his white flowing beard and weather beaten face he looked too much like the wizened characters of a long ago and best forgotten era. Some suspected that he carried snowshoes under his down parka wherever he went and was anxious to use them. He was the unwanted relative who never seemed to know when he had overstayed his welcome. Witnesses were brought forth to testify and the derogatory comments regarding the old man's behavior were unfit for a well-driller's ears. I had been anxious to bring snowmobilers, ice fishermen and skiers to the stand but there were none to be found, It was later learned they were outside busily enjoying the benefits of Old Man Winter's bounty.

The Prosecution had rested and I was ready for my moment in the "sun" so to speak. "Old Man Winter" I began, "stirs the wild depths of the human spirit. When you see the winds blowing across the fields only to sculpt into beautiful drifts accompanied by the music of his sonorous whistling something primeval is pulled forth into the conscious mind."

"Objection!!" shouted the Prosecutor, "the defendants attorney is engaging in cheap prose and is obviously avoiding reality!"

"Stick to the facts, young man!" scolded the Judge. "Objection sustained."

Stung but somehow fortified by the challenge, I resumed my monologue.

"Who among us has not gazed on the fresh fallen snow and for a moment seen life in its virginal state, untouched by mankind. Who has not ventured forth with a sense of awe and responsibility as they became the first to lay their tracks upon a picture perfect canvas. Who among us has."

"He's doing it again!" interrupted the prosecutor.

"Overruled." sighed the judge. "Now I'm curious where this is leading. But beware young man, this better be good."

I stared calmly into the Judge's eyes with a knowing look of confidence.

"When we speak to our relatives and friends who have fled to the southern climes and with a chuckle they complain to us of a cold snap in the 60's, we endure. They say it sarcastically as if we are fools and should be packed and on our way south abandoning all that is sacred and beautiful around us.

"How often have we seen something that has been a part of our everyday experience when suddenly it is stripped of surrounding foliage and it appears to the insular eye as a thing of undiscovered beauty. Or to be traipsing about on snowshoes in an area that was previously unreachable. Winter makes explorers and poets out of us. We discover things

in a raw and natural state that only Old Man winter can reveal.” I glanced apologetically at Autumn but his serene expression never wavered as if he knew I would have to say things to hurt him and he accepted that.

“Winter has made us stronger, made survivors of us. Old Man Winter is the son of the ice age.” At this comment, the prosecutor rolled his eyes. “Early man adapted and survived in spite of the glacial onslaught. Old Man Winter has taught us to rise up and meet challenges from within our souls that redefine our sense of existence. This white fringed master of the season, I leveled my gaze back on the judge, makes us, no..demands that we appreciate the other three seasons. We endure for the sole opportunity of starting over.” Spring sat up and smiled, suddenly dignified. “Old Man Winter requires that we live or perish. Keep moving or freeze. Winter has taught us that if you survive me, you can survive! But!” I exclaimed with a warning tone, “if we opt to wait it out indoors we become addled and crazy with cabin fever. Even the Senior Citizens of the North who have the means to retreat to a warmer setting but choose to stay, look at them! There is a glow of life that burns from within and they are busy living life, not listening for the final countdown. They are sustained and they owe it...I owe it..we all owe it ” I turned and pointed to my client, “to him. Old Man Winter.”

The Judge broke down in tears. The Prosecuting Attorney threw his hands up in dismay while the spectators in the crowd stood and cheered. I had done it. Now it was only a formality. The Judge smacked his gavel and half crying declared, “the defendant is cleared of all charges..case dismissed.” I collapsed into a chair and reached out my hand to the old man. He took it in his icy grip and shook it vigorously. “I knew you could do it.” he bellowed.

His breath bit into my face and fresh tears flooded my eyes. I turned away nodding my head, “I believe in you.” I replied.

As the courtroom emptied the Citizens filed by and patted me on the shoulder.

“Come on out to the farm,” I heard one say, “we’re havin’ a sleigh ride.”

“Rabbit huntin’ tomorrow!” said another.

In a bigger sense my task was complete. People were getting back outdoors and enjoying Winter.

When it seemed too much time had gone by I looked up...the courtroom was empty . I slowly made my way to the exit. Out in the parking lot mine was the lone automobile waiting patiently under a freshly fallen blanket of snow. The soft street lights by the town hall were the solitary beacons of geography and cast a beautiful illumination on the snow as it descended from the darkness above only to dance through the spotlight and fall to the earth below. I shuffled carelessly through the powder and was jerked to a halt by a familiar old voice.

“Thanks again,” said the Old Man, his voice carried aloft on a stiff north wind. With a spring in his ancient step he slid over to me and with grand fatherly affection took me in his arms and hugged me. I felt a chill go through my bones and shivered uncontrollably. “I must be off,” he whispered and like that, he was both everywhere and gone.

I brushed the snow off my truck and climbed into the driver’s seat. Finding the correct key I inserted it into the ignition and turned it. “*Idonwanna Idonwanna*” the battery complained then clicked a few times in dying defiance. The streets as well as the parking lot were deserted and I resigned myself to either a long wait or a long walk in the falling snow. I laughed to myself and thought, “Oh well, sometimes the guilty go free.”

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I have to say a special hello to my folks, who I talk to on a regular basis, so this is really nothing more than blowing smoke up the old family tree. Happy Birthday to Betty (my mom) who celebrated another one this past month and to my dad, Ed, or Fuzz, as he has been called since I can remember, who, tomorrow morning will get out of bed to see his shadow with the groundhog (as he has done every year since February 2, 1926) and as long as he “answers roll call” this world will remain a safer, more friendly, slightly irreverent, funny and wonderful place.

As for you and me? If we all hold our breath and count to ten, it will be March and spring will be around the corner. But until then, get outside, if for no other reason than to say you got outside today, take a deep breath and think of me. I’ll be shoveling snow.

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Please feel free to pass this Newsletter along to your friends and family and have them drop me a line (mikeridley@triton.net) if they would like to be added to the mailing list. Again, if this is an inconvenience, an inappropriate address or just too much to sort through, let me know.

For more information about sinkholes in northeast Michigan check out the Michigan Karst Conservancy online.

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This issue brought ot you by Cupid, who’s wearing a diaper to keep from freezing his little ass off