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Looking for land up in Michigan
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—“I’m thinking,” I said to my wife a month ago, “U. P.”

“You first,” Melissa said.

When you were voted second funniest in your high school class 45 years ago, you expect people to make runs at your title.

U.P. jokes are one burden that residents of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula -- Yoopers -- bear. But I figured that any place averaging fewer than 19 head per square mile was likely to be a good place to find land.

We drove north through Ontario, then west along the scrubby, rocky shore of Lake Huron. Not much goes on there. Melissa clapped when we passed parked cars.

Restaurants were infrequent between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

One of two featured “Boiled plate for \$7.”

“A good Hollandaise always smoothes out my dishes,” Melissa said. Even then, she doubted that she’d really like the way foreigners fix crockery.

The other choice -- about 50 miles west -- announced “All the Chinese you can eat for \$10.”

“Two’s about my limit these days,” I admitted.

“They are getting bigger on western diets,” Melissa said. “Maybe you can get leftovers bagged up for take-home.”

The next morning we drove from Sault Ste. Marie into the U.P. We stopped at a shop selling fair-trade coffee in the Chippewa community of Bay Mills on the south side of Lake Superior.

I wasn’t expecting upscale coffee on Whitefish Bay. Still, Starbucks chairman Howard Schultz did graduate from the U. P.’s Northern Michigan University in Marquette. Would Paul Bunyan who reportedly spent some quality time in this area stir designer coffee with his thumb?

Later, I stopped in a lakeside market to buy smoked trout and whitefish. The

price per pound was cheap, but the proprietor evened things up by taping over the plastic bubble on my side of his scale. I gave him \$25 to cover a \$22 bill; he gave me two dollars in change.

I've always admired genuinely honest, blatant, transparent thievery. I got two days of laughs and two paragraphs for a buck--a fair transaction in my opinion.

The eastern U. P. is pretty flat, almost entirely forested, with many streams and lakes. I offered to escort Melissa to the Blind Sucker River and its kin, the Dead Sucker. She said nice girls from Charlotte, North Carolina favored resorts over suckers of either kind.

The western U.P. is hilly and rougher. Its older, volcanic geology left copper and iron.

I called several real-estate agents. I said I was looking for timberland and was NOT interested in views, water amenities, road frontage, cutover woods, pasture, swamps and improvements. Anything over 25 acres might work as long as it had timber that hadn't been cut for at least 50 years.

One suggested a ten-acre parcel with a "nice mix of two-thirds open and one-third, young woods." Another wanted to show me one acre "right on Lake Superior with some large trees."

"Too many boiled plates," Melissa allowed.

We then spent some time in the upper end of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, near Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. People who live below the Mackinac Bridge often have vacation homes in the U.P. I'm told Yoopers call them, "Trolls." Not all that much hostility is intended, it was explained.

At a cherry stand near Traverse City, I met a developer driving a Rolls Royce. He said he grew up in Michigan. Now, he's Big Money from Virginia, on the prowl.

Back in my F-150 pickup truck and Ford-dealership hat, I said to Melissa, "I look more like a Troll than he does."

"You could wear ten ball caps one on top of the other and spit tobacco out of both ears, and you'd still look like an over-educated, elitist, Yankee college professor."

Melissa doesn't much like over-educated, elitist Yankee intellectuals—a fact she shared with me about ten years into our now 25-year-long marriage.

When we got home late on Sunday afternoon, the phone rang within 30 seconds. “You have a dead steer across the road. Been that way about five days.” The neighbors don’t like dead-stink any more than I do, especially when it’s not theirs.

The farm welcomed us home as only a farm can.

The remains of the lightning-struck steer were alive with about 40 million maggots. After 15 minutes of trying, I managed to snag barely enough of what was left on the forks of my tractor to carry it over to a large brush pile in the orchard. It was like lifting 750 pounds of JELL-O in a disintegrating plastic bag

All over-educated, elitist Yankee intellectuals should do such work from time to time: online doesn’t count.

Melissa brought over two lawn chairs and a ham-and-cheese sandwich. She doesn’t like to be left out of sagas.

I lit the pile. We watched the bonfire’s yellows and reds for about an hour. Night fell. It was a little pre-historic.

Melissa said she had had a good time looking for land in Michigan. She liked the pretty places and the rough-and-tumble ones too. The Yankees were friendly as pups, except for the border guard who asked her nationality, and she answered, “Virginian.”

I’d showed her the five Great Lakes, thousands of acres of forests and one Chinese restaurant that finally offered something more filling than an egg roll.

And when I turned on the television news after a ten-day absence, McCain was still saying that Obama was too young and stupid to be president, and Obama was still saying that McCain was too old and stupid to be president. We were back.

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