

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

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Between 1958 and 1962, I attended school at Michigan College of Mining and Technology in Houghton Michigan. The school was located on the frozen southern shore of Lake Superior in the far northwest part of the Upper Peninsula. At the time my hometown was Tecumseh, in the deep southeast corner of the Lower Peninsula, near the Ohio border and Lake Erie. An inspiring college environment! A fantastic hometown! A bummer commute!

The only economical, convenient, and direct mode of transportation between Houghton and Tecumseh, a distance of 575 miles, was via a private dilapidated automobile. Starving Tech students further controlled their transportation costs by car pooling. Generally, after a holiday break, our car pool would leave Tecumseh around seven in the evening, drive through the moonless unforgiving night and reach Houghton just in time to attend our first morning class. This meant that we were crossing the new majestic Straits of Mackinac Bridge, connecting the Lower and Upper Peninsulas, at about one in the morning. At the straits, we always filled our gas tank at the only all night station open for hundreds of miles around. Houghton was still 275 miles and six-hours ahead of us. Cramming four smelly, irritable Tech students into a cramped old jalopy in the middle of winter, for this monotonous, wearisome journey does not exactly describe an evening of frivolity. It wasn't.

To understand the Upper Peninsula in winter, imagine a vast frozen, forested and rocky frontier, a climate and topography that is not inviting to a large concentrated population. At its maximum dimensions, the peninsula is about 350 miles east to west and 175 miles north to south. The population of this entire area hovers around 325,000 hearty, deep freeze loving people. Between the Straits of Mackinac and Houghton, on one trip after a winter holiday break, during the middle of the night we did not meet a single car heading in the opposite direction. A traffic jam consisted of meeting two cars. Meeting one car was just heavy traffic. The words "frozen desolation" comes to mind when discussing a winter night in the UP. In comparison, Orange County, California has a population of about 3,250,000 people in a concentrated area approximately 15% of the geographical size of the Upper Peninsula and most of these people live within a few miles of the coast.

In addition to the frigid temperatures, there was the added dimension of colossal Paul Bunyan size snow falls. For you native Southern Californians, snow is that fluffy white cold stuff, produced by God, which falls from the sky. It is not the stuff that someone pays to have trucked in for children to play in, nor is it manufactured by man. In the late fifties and early sixties it was not unusual to have a seasonal snow fall of fifteen feet with a ten-foot accumulation on the ground, all courtesy of the atmospheric lake effect produced by the cold winds from Canada. We have never forgiven the Canadians. Each winter, snow blanketed the ground from October until April. Minus ten below zero temperatures were expected during the day. Generally, nights were significantly colder.

Returning to college from our winter holiday, I and three other male Tech students were not expecting to spend part of the night slumbering in free lodging, courtesy of the local government. Having crossed the bridge, we were traveling west along the south shore of Gitchee Gumee, by the shining big sea waters, under a starless and moonless sky. We were more than half way to Houghton from the bridge, approaching the two small towns of Negaunee and Ishpeming. One of the areas that we had just traversed was a 25 mile, straight as Hiawatha's arrow, stretch of highway between Seney and Shingleton. The state had only plowed one lane through this area, not one lane in each direction. The snow depth was a minimum of ten feet. Snow thrown from the plows added significantly more in places. We had just experienced a practical lesson about what the "deer in the headlights" cliché meant when we met a large herd crossing the road directly in front of us. We were now driving on a more civilized road where a lane was plowed in each direction. About 15 miles east of

these two small towns, the car sputtered its contempt, decided that it had taken enough abuse, and died. We had filled our tank at the straits so we knew we had gas. We were stranded. The frigid temperatures threatened trouble. While we had winter clothing, we didn't dare go to sleep to wait for morning and rescue, because our clothes were insufficient to keep us warm during an outdoor winter slumber. People don't wake up from slumber under those conditions. We also judged that it was way too far to walk into the nearest town. Plus there was virtually no light, either natural or manmade. This pre-historic era was before cell phones and credit cards. Even if they had been available, we were typical starving college students with no money. There weren't even any emergency telephone booths along this stretch of barren, deserted highway. The wigwam of Nokomis would have been very welcome (1) (2).

We could see tail lights a long distance in front of us and headlights an equally long distance behind us, probably other crazy Tech students returning to school. The tail lights would be of no help, but probably the headlights were on a car owned by some compassionate person who could help. The Good Samaritan code prevailing in this forbidden frozen wasteland was to always help friends and strangers during times of distress. It took about 20 minutes for the first car exhibiting headlights to reach us which, of course, contained four Tech students. This lapse of time gave us a chance to take care of some bodily functions. In this sub-zero frigid atmosphere, water never hit the ground, just yellow ice. After they arrived and some discussion, our group decided that all eight of us needed to pile into the functioning car and head for the next town where we could be safely dropped off. The four of us were now stuffed into the car that already had held its maximum load of four. Two were crammed onto the back seats which now held four and two sat on the floor boards between the legs of two others. It wasn't comfortable, but it was warm. One of the students from the rescuing car confidently suggested that we drive to the nearest police station and ask to stay overnight in the jail. From experience, he believed that this would be a reasonable request, and the police would be accommodating.

Arriving at the station, we told the night policeman, an older understanding gentleman, of our predicament, and he readily offered:

"We don't have any prisoners tonight, so go find a comfy cell in the back and have a good night's sleep. We won't lock the doors."

The cells were warm with no wind chill, but comfy was not exactly a correct description. That is unless; sleeping on welded steel bars with no mattress was a description of comfy. At least we wouldn't freeze to death during the night and would wake up reasonably refreshed in the morning. Also, the price was right. The rescuing car and its passengers had proceeded on to Houghton.

Long after dawn, I finally awoke, refreshed and ready to conquer our misbehaving car and complete our journey. After a big stretch and a healthy yawn, I looked around our Spartan accommodations and noticed my three companions were still peacefully asleep, there were no new inhabitants, and the cell doors were unlocked as promised. I could see at the end of the long hallway, the jailer's office where the day policeman was leaning back on his desk chair apparently sound asleep. I even detected a low volume peaceful snoring. Apparently it was a slow day. I was about to change that. I walked out to the front desk to say hello and offer a great big thank you. It sure would have been nice if the older understanding night policeman had informed the young excitable day policeman, the only one on duty that morning, that he had guests in the cell block. Was the practical joke being perpetrated on us or him?

Hearing my footsteps approaching from the cell block, the day policeman was instantly awake. Startled, is probably an understatement as he leaped up and reached for his gun.

"Don't shoot! Last night, they said that we could stay here! We're not criminals!" I pleaded with both hands on my head. I was exhibiting my most docile submissive personality, judged a necessity at this time and place. Fast sudden moves, aggressive arguments, and angry outbursts would not have been appropriate and could have been potentially fatal.

"Where did you come from?" How did you get here? were the first words he screamed at me.

"From your cell block. The doors are unlocked." I calmly answered.

“Are there any more of you back there?” He frantically continued.

“Yes, three more. They are still asleep.” I again calmly answered.

He started to hyperventilate as he became aware that he was outnumbered.

“Why are you here?” he continued to excitedly scream with his hand still nervously fondling his gun.

I continued to serenely and calmly explain the situation of the broken down car, and he seemed to understand.

His voice started to become a little softer and less panicky. He even offered me a cup of coffee.

By now my other three comrades were awake from all of the screaming and were standing in the hallway in plain view. Apparently, we didn’t look very threatening.

After the four of us become friends with the day policemen, even sharing some jokes, we walked to the local garage he had suggested which was now open, had the car towed in and repaired.

Whatever was wrong was readily fixed and we were on our way before noon. It was probably something as simple as a broken distributor cap. Although we had missed our morning classes, we had survived our unforgettable adventure of spending a night in jail. It had been much better than freezing.

- (1) All references to Gitchee Gumee, by the shining big sea waters, the wigwam of Nokomis, and Hiawatha are from “The Song of Hiawatha” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- (2) Gordon Lightfoot used the name Gitchee Gumee to refer to Lake Superior in his song “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.”

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