

Dear Friends,

This is my first letter in a while. I had planned a trip to Paris and New York, but called off the Paris part – too much was happening at once for two trips back to back. I did go to New York in May, but didn't write about it. I spent most of my time there visiting people and doing research in the art history libraries at the Metropolitan Museum and at Columbia (right: Columbia's Avery Architecture & Fine Arts Library). It was fun and engaging, but not really the stuff of legend.



In June, though, I flew to Michigan for a county-collecting trip, and to see Detroit, where I had never been (outside the airport anyway) and which did seem, from what I had heard, to be the S of L. I met up with Lee Oestreicher, my companion on some of these trips, and after a night at a Detroit Motel 6 (very comfortable and dirt cheap), we set out the next morning to plow through the remaining 39 counties of Michigan (out of 83).

The first stop, just over the Oakland county line in Royal Oak, was the [National Shrine of the Little Flower](#). The Little Flower is [St. Thérèse of Lisieux](#) [Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, O.C.D. (1873-1897)], a French nun and mystic. The NS of the LF was founded by [Father Charles Coughlin](#) (1871-1979), a noted Fascist and anti-Semite and poisonous radio commentator. His bishop finally shut him down after some very high-handed and arguably unconstitutional pressure from the Roosevelt administration.



But never mind! All so long ago now! And the church is a magnificent Art Deco creation, with a remarkable octagonal nave and richly ornamental reliefs.



And then on to Bad Axe, the county seat of Huron County. If lower Michigan is shaped like a mitten (see map on page 7), Huron County is the tip of the thumb. When I drove through Michigan in 1982 I passed right by this county without stepping in, leaving it as an outlier to torment me on the map for the next 32 years, and forcing me (well, not *forcing* exactly, more like *whining and cajoling*) to drive hundreds of miles out of my way, through counties already covered (not mentioned here), to correct this old neglect. OAKLAND, MACOMB, HURON. Despite its romantic name, Bad Axe is not all that

interesting a town, and after lunch we headed back onto the road, through several more previously-visited counties, to get back to some new ones. ISABELLA, CLARE, MISSAUKEE, ROSCOMMON, CRAWFORD, OTSEGO, ANTRIM.¹



The northern towns of Michigan's southern peninsula are, unusually, still working. The storefronts are not all shuttered, or fly-by-night junk shops and nail salons; there is a modest bustle on the streets, and (a key indicator) the movie theatres are still open. True, they were all showing *How To Train Your Dragon 2*, but that's miles better than *For Rent*. How come, we asked them in Bad Axe. What are people doing here, besides agriculture? Working in the oil fields, it turns out ([oil in Michigan](#)? who knew?) and building wind turbines. In Antrim County (home of the Antrim oil shale fields) we stopped near the water in the lovely lakeside town of



Arden, and idled by the shore for a while, enjoying the mist and the gentle lapping sound, and the seaweedy smells and informal *Cannery Row* feeling of the boatyard.

And then it was back to rural Michigan, through a country of green, well-kept farms, weathered red barns, and fields of corn and beans just coming up, not yet as high as an elephant's knee or sometimes even his toe. There were hardly any animals around, except for a team of sturdy Amish plowhorses, but we did smell some pigs (very easy to smell pigs even at some distance). The motto of Michigan (seen on the state seal on page 1 of this letter) is *Si Quæris Peninsulam Amœnam Circumspice*, which means *if you seek a*



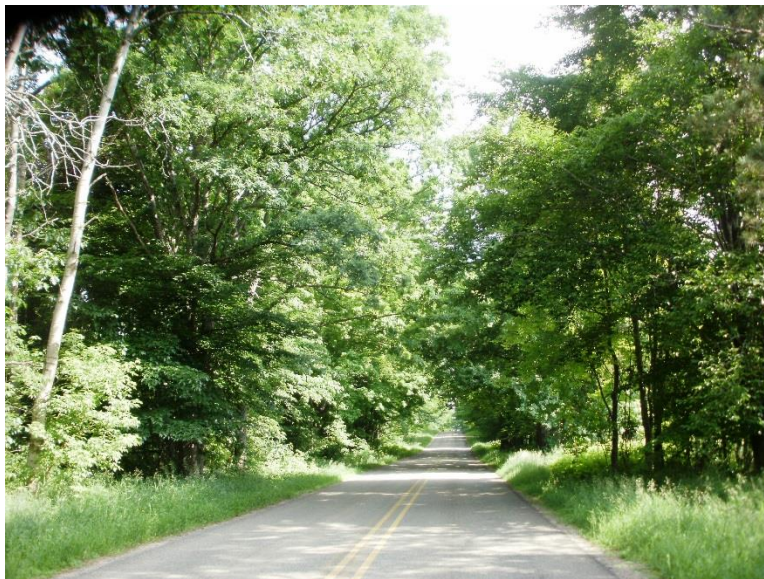
¹ Clare, Roscommon and Antrim (and Wexford, which we reached later) are also counties of Ireland.

*pleasant peninsula, look around you.*² We were seeking one, and we did look around us, and were satisfied. LEELANAU, BENZIE, MANISTEE, WEXFORD, LAKE, MASON, OCEANA, OSCEOLA, MECOSTA, GRATIOT, CLINTON, INGHAM.



In Ingham County we nosed around the enormous campus of Michigan State University, where Lee had attended a conference back in the Cleveland Administration, and then went on to Lansing. The State Capitol (for a virtual tour look [here](#)) was impressive, as they all are, but yet somehow routine – we have become very jaded after seeing so many of these high imposing buildings. And maybe we were tiring a bit, too, but given the choice we were glad to leave the State Capitol for the Motel 6.

And then onward again. The southern counties of the southern peninsula are rougher, shaggier, and the towns not as prosperous as those further north. The county towns now displayed their familiar blight; the movie theatres were closed. The countryside was still bright green, though, a change from the brown hills of California, and the earth looked lusher as trees and bushes and lustrous thick biomass grew wild on untended verges, and stands of tall prairie grass rose among the furrowed fields. Trees met overhead in forested places. SHIAWASSEE, LIVINGSTON, WASHTENAW, JACKSON, EATON, CALHOUN, BARRY, KALAMAZOO.



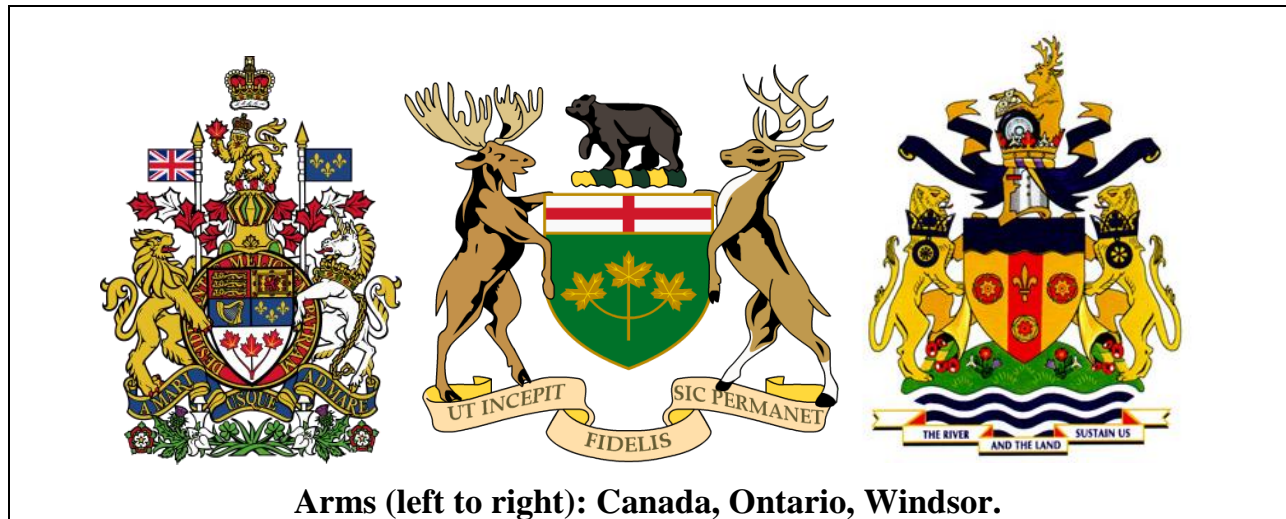
² The motto, adopted in 1835, was probably suggested by the memorial tablet to Christopher Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, which reads *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* (if you seek his monument, look around you).



Kalamazoo, despite its evocative name, was a gloomy site of decay, and we did not linger long. Back and forth we cruised across the state, VAN BUREN, BERRIEN, CASS, BRANCH, HILLSDALE, LENAWEЕ, MONROE, and then made a quick dip into Ohio to score almost the last remaining state line.³ There were not many tourist attractions to divert us, although we did stop every so often to take out our gray steel bridge chairs (from Target) and sit in a shady glen to soak up atmosphere. Finally we made our way back to Detroit and the place of beginning.

Detroit, yes, but first across the magnificent Ambassador Bridge to Windsor, Ontario! It is a nice Canadian town, with some of Detroit's down-at-the-heels flavor but not too much, great views of the sleek modern towers of Detroit across the river (looking as if they were not vacant shells), and an enormous Caesar's casino complex that seems about eight times too big for the town it's in. We followed a long avenue through one ethnicity after another, whole blocks of Vietnamese restaurants followed by more blocks where almost every sign was in Arabic letters. We chose a quiet Iraqi place for a leisurely late lunch, with great music and delicious food (*baba ganoush*, lamb stewed with okra), before going back (through a tunnel this time) and facing the wreck of Detroit.

³ The only ones left that I haven't yet crossed are NV-OR and NV-ID, both in the desert more than 1000 miles from the nearest unvisited county. How am I going to finish them off?



There was lots to see in Detroit, including some notable museums and historic homes, but after going through 48 counties in six days we were not really in the mood for ordinary tourism. The main thing I had come to see was the famous devastation, which was said to be epic – Rebecca Solnit wrote some years ago that “this continent has not seen a transformation like Detroit’s since the last days of the Maya.”⁴ So that is what we concentrated on.

Devastation was not hard to find in Detroit. The population has fallen by about 2/3 since its peak in 1960, leaving thousands of homes empty and decaying. That much abandoned housing causes blight that infects the houses that are *not* abandoned, as value floods out of property in whole neighborhoods. Businesses atrophy. Services diminish. No one will buy in neighborhoods where every third house is boarded up, so those who remain find their mortgages under water; they too leave, or at least stop paying, and their homes are foreclosed. Then it is *two* houses out of three, as the remaining houses rot and crumble, or are demolished, leaving vacant lots. No one goes to the empty business streets, so the remaining businesses also fold; empty apartment houses are burnt out, stripped of their copper wiring, and left as ruined graffiti-covered hulks.



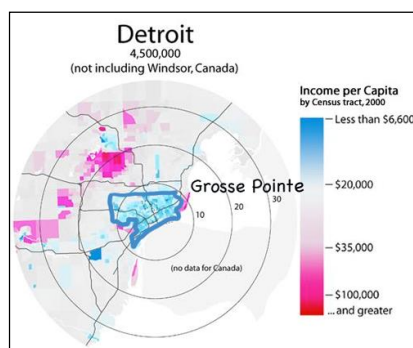
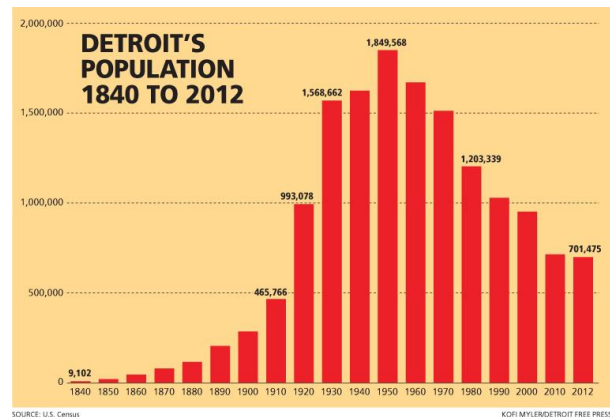
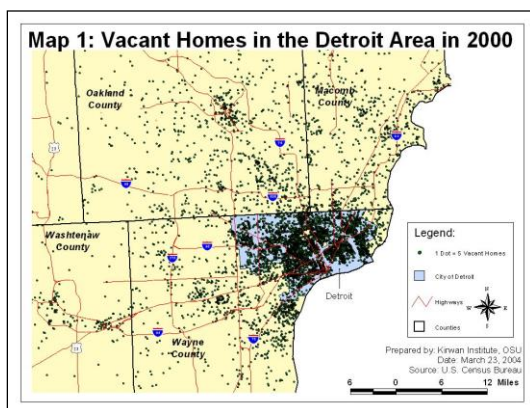
Detroit is not *all* abandoned, and some neighborhoods seem quite normal (on the main streets, anyway, although often not on the nearby side streets). But things are bad enough

⁴ In “[Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape](#),” in the June 2007 issue of Harper’s.

in the worst-affected districts that the main plan for recovery is to demolish blighted areas and concentrate the population elsewhere (just where is of course yet to be determined). The city would like to demolish at least 40,000 buildings (some plans go as high as 85,000), but at an average cost of \$10,000 each that would take money the city (now bankrupt and its government under a state-appointed “emergency manager”) doesn’t have. The *New York Times* [reported](#) a recent finding

that 30 percent of buildings, or 78,506 of them, scattered across the city’s 139 square miles, are dilapidated or heading that way. It found that 114,000 parcels – about 30 percent of the city’s total – are vacant. And it found that more than 90 percent of publicly held parcels are blighted.

How did it get this bad? Deindustrialization, of course, as the automobile industry foundered and was then reconstituted based on robotics instead of a large unionized labor force. The 1967 riots, followed by white flight itself enabled by a freeway system that decoupled work and residence, and allowed jobholders to leave while keeping the unemployed in the central city. Flight of capital, foreclosure, withdrawal of federal aid from cities. The article linked to in note 4 on the previous page tells a lot of the story very well. Here are three charts that sum up the numbers – note that two of them date to 2000.



As we drove through the affected parts of Detroit we saw almost no one on the streets. Very occasionally a bereft figure – always black – could be seen ambling slowly, as if sleepwalking, through knee-high weeds, making his way (why?) from one empty block to another. We saw one determined, defiant resident mowing the lawn in front of a house surrounded by overgrown vacant lots. In many blocks the forest was returning, with now quite substantial trees growing in front of abandoned front doors. Whole long boulevards once lined with businesses are now completely dead. Talk of returning the land to grazing and pasture, or even agriculture, fails to consider the asphalt of the streets and the concrete slabs below the ruined houses, and the toxicity that must remain in the

earth beneath them even if it could be reached. One enterprising pioneer has brought a flock of sheep down to the city to graze – would you eat a lamb chop from one of them?

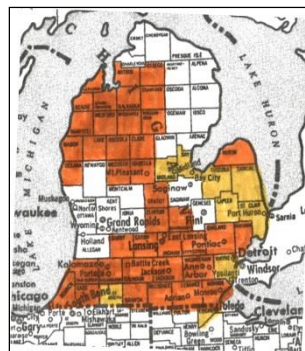


Here is the very handsome public seal of Detroit, adopted in principle (although not in exactly this style) in 1835. The motto *resurget cineribus* means *it will rise from the ashes* (referring originally to a fire in 1805); *speramus meliora* means *we hope for better things*. Maybe it will rise from the ashes; we can hope for better things without having much confidence that they will appear. But then who knows? No one expected Hiroshima to rise from the ashes either, but now it has more than eight times the population it had at the end of the war. Meanwhile Detroit is an astonishing sight. Just as I never understood deforestation until I saw it, live, in Ethiopia, I never understood blight until now.⁵ Most of the pictures on the next page we took ourselves from our car – they suggest the melancholy flavor of the place. After a while we stopped taking pictures. Our images are mostly of private residential building sites; but for a dramatic photo gallery of derelict public buildings, and ghostly interiors – theatres, hotels, the former train station – look [here](#).

Anyway, that was my trip, and I'm glad I went, but I'm glad it's over too, and glad to be home. A shortage of housing causes problems in San Francisco, but nothing like the problems of surfeit.

David

July 2014



Red = 39 new counties.
Yellow = 8 old counties revisited.
White: previously reached.
New count: 2396 counties (76.48%).

⁵ I have seen plenty of blight in small towns for decades now, but nothing on a scale like this.

