

## The Leaning Tree Lodge

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Creative Writing: Non-Fiction

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submitted to: Professor Nicodemus

We are still a few miles from the Leaning Tree Lodge as we head down North Down River Road just past Grayling, Michigan. The old, winding road leading toward the lodge is crumbling due to neglect. The land on either side of the road is barren except for a few scrubby pines dotting the landscape. Charred trees stand forlornly in the openness, their grim shadows stretching along the sandy ground. A fire swept through this area of the state a few years ago, and the effects of it are still noticeable. Fortunately, the lodge and the surrounding land, which hold so many family memories, were spared from the destruction of the fire.



**The AuSable River.**

A sandy road just past Wakeley Bridge leads to the lodge. As we approach the turn-off, the old oak tree comes into view. Its rough bark is covered with handmade signs telling who resides down the road. A brown sign with yellow lettering near the top is among the many others, and lets visitors know the

Leaning Tree Lodge is not much farther.

We bounce over the rutted dirt road in our fire engine-red Jeep Grand Cherokee. Scraggly grass grows in the middle of the two-track and occasionally brushes the bottom of the Jeep. Up ahead is the lodge, standing in between tall pine trees with its two-door garage perpendicular to it.

Formerly known as the Esper Club, it was built by the Esper family from Westphalia, Michigan, in the late 1930's.



**Having fun around the campfire.**

There were five brothers in the family and all of them were Catholic priests in the Arch Diocese of Detroit. The lodge provided the brothers with a place where they could hunt, fish, play cards and relax. Eventually, they invited other priests from the Lansing and Detroit Dioceses to join then as co-owners of the lodge.

My great uncle, Eugene Sears, was one of the early members of the Esper Club. In 1977 though, the priests in control of the lodge decided to sell it. My Grandpa and Grandma Hanley (my grandma was my great uncle's sister) bought the lodge from the priests. From that point on, the lodge has provided many memories for my family.

The lodge is a wooden, two-story structure painted a dull yellow. The chimney pokes through green shingles covering the roof. The garage is the same yellow color as the lodge, but only one-story high. I always remember seeing the 1951 Jeep Willys Station Wagon in the garage whenever I looked inside. It sat in



**Sitting in the 1951 Jeep Willys Station Wagon.**

the garage, accumulating raccoon tracks on its dusty hood, because it didn't run well. Just a few years ago, though, my dad had it worked on and now it is in running condition and is a blast to drive. My dad has told me stories of when he was young and went off-roading in the Jeep with my great uncle. He said they would just ride around in the woods, not following any particular trail, and constantly bounce up and down in the backseat.

A memorable time at the lodge was when I drove a forest-green Corvette convertible. My Uncle Pat was with my dad at the lodge, and my mom, brother and I had gone over there to see them. No one was there when we arrived, so we went inside and waited for them to return.

After a little while, I began to hear a low rumble. It grew louder, so I went to the window and saw my dad and uncle approaching in the Corvette with the top down. I couldn't believe it. My uncle, who works for General Motors, told me he had it for the weekend to "evaluate" it. He offered me a test drive, so I jumped into the driver's seat. I drove slowly out to the main road, trying not to scrape the bottom of the low-slung Vette on the roots protruding from the earth. Once on the asphalt, I accelerated until we were going about fifty miles-per-hour. The wind tousled my hair as we snaked through the turns in the road. Being a car enthusiast, it was exhilarating for me to be driving a convertible sports car. If I had not been so nervous, I probably would have gone a little faster.

We drive across the clearing where spindly grass tries to grow and on which so many games have been played. We have played soccer, baseball, football, frisbee and even croquet in the clearing. It was always a place grown-ups told energetic youngsters to go.



A huge White **Down at the dock.**

Pine stands off to the right, its pine needles and pine cones littering the ground beneath it. A rope swing with a yellow seat hangs from one of the tree's limbs. I have never really used the swing because I was too big for it by the time it was put up a few years ago. Stepping out of the Jeep, I walk toward the other side of the lodge with the screened-in porch running its entire length. Concrete steps lead from the porch down to the small dock on the edge of the river. The forest encroaches on either side of the moss-covered steps as I walk down to the AuSable River.

The lodge was built on a 22 acre site running along the main vein of the AuSable River.

At the time of construction, the land was under lease from Consumers Power Company. Consumers leased the land because they needed to control the river for their hydroelectric dam in Mio, Michigan. Eventually, two acres were purchased from Consumers, including 200 feet of river frontage. A few years after my grandparents bought the lodge, Consumers offered to sell the remaining acreage around it. Only ten acres were available now, though, because the State of Michigan had acquired the rest of the land to create a public landing for canoes as well as a picnic area. With the purchase of the remaining ten acres, the lodge had close to 1100 feet of river frontage.

Standing on the wooden slats of the dock, I hear the water gurgling happily beneath me. Two wooden benches are nailed to the dock: one of them has a backrest, one of them doesn't. I scan the river's clear water as it flows by the dock. The river is fairly wide here, but it can become narrow at places where fallen trees clutter it. The DNR used to cut back the toppled trees which stuck out into the water. Now, they only cut trees which completely block the river, creating a more natural, but harder to canoe, river. The river is only a few feet deep in front of the dock. It can get as deep as ten feet, or as shallow as a few inches which can make it difficult for a canoe or tube to scrape over the bottom. Trees lean over the river, dipping their branches



**Loading the canoes.**

into the water. Small pebbles litter the bottom of the river while weeds move rhythmically back and forth in the strong current, like the hands of a conductor directing a sorrowful ballad.

When we went canoeing at the lodge, we would get the canoes from the garage and

load them on top of cars, tying them down securely with rope. Then, we would drive to Stephan

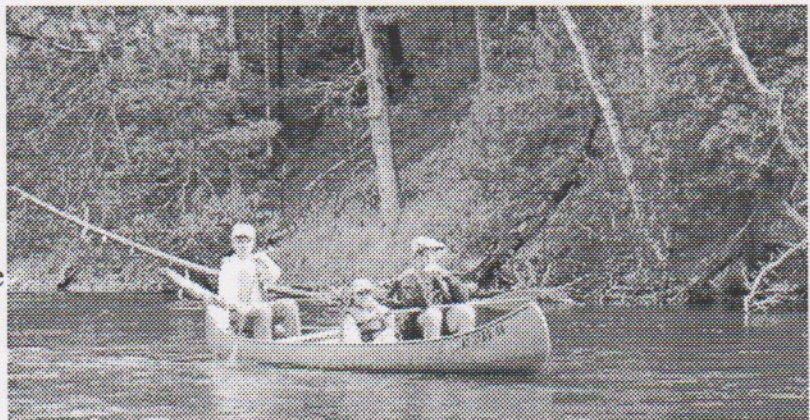
Bridge and put the canoes in the river. When my brother and I were little, my family would be in one canoe. As we grew older, my brother and I would take a canoe and my parents would take one of their own. The float down the river back to the lodge was about two hours. The current of the AuSable was strong enough to pull us along if we didn't feel like paddling. We



**Tubing down the river with my Uncle Kevin.**

passed cabins, fly-fisherman and people tubing down the river. Wildlife was also abundant on the river. Great Blue Herons and other birds occasionally swooped down from the pines lining the river. Sometimes if we were lucky, we would see a beaver or an otter swim across the river. Fish would also periodically jump from the water, their sleek bodies glimmering in the sunlight for an instant. Instead of canoeing, we would sometimes go tubing down the river. We would load our tubes and water mattresses into cars and drive to the landing.

The water of the AuSable was never really warm, so if the sun wasn't out, one could get a little chilly floating down the river. The peaceful setting of the river was sometimes interrupted by the distant rumble of artillery coming



**Canoeing down the AuSable.**

from Camp Grayling, an Army National Guard training area in the region. The sound of combat could be clearly heard at the lodge during training exercises.

In the summertime, we would watch the AuSable Canoe Marathon. The race went from Grayling to Oscoda and came by the lodge at night. I remember sitting on the porch swing with my relatives as the racers went by. Looking down to the river, I could see them zip past the dock in their streamlined fiberglass canoes. The racers paddled furiously, churning the water as they went by.

I walk back up to the front of the house, passing the old pine tree stump near the front

door. The name of the lodge was changed from the Esper Club to the Leaning Tree Lodge because of this rotting stump. Shortly after my grandparents purchased the lodge, some of my



**My brother and I standing on the stump in front of the lodge.**

relatives decided to cut down the 150 foot Michigan Pine near the front door. As the work progressed, the tree began to lean closer and closer to the lodge. Finally, some experienced tree-cutters were called to complete the job and save the lodge from being finished off.

The front screen door opens with a high-pitched screech and swings shut behind me with a sharp bang as I enter. The earth tones of the well-furnished living room give it a warm, cozy feeling. In the past, though, it was considerably more rustic.

Back when the priests owned the lodge there wasn't any electrical service, so a generator in the garage was used for power. Water service wasn't provided either, so a Rupp pump was installed near a dammed up spring on the side of the hill leading down to the river. The water was pumped into a tank on the second floor of the lodge so it could be used as needed. An old wood stove and a fireplace were the only sources of heat in the lodge. A bath or shower were out of the question. My grandparents extensively renovated the lodge after they purchased it. An electric furnace and a shower were installed, the kitchen was thoroughly modernized, and the bedrooms were renovated. Now, up to 18 people can comfortably sleep in the lodge. Many of these improvements were orchestrated by my Grandma Hanley.

Near the front door is the large wooden dining room table with the heavy chairs around it. When family and friends are gathered at the lodge, this is a place where story telling, poker playing and devouring barbecued chicken occurs. On either side of the door, there is a window

and a rocking chair. Green and white patterned cushions lay on top of the white, wicker frames of the rockers. Sitting in one of these chairs, one has a good view of what is happening outside as well as inside.

The large wooden dresser at one end of the room is of the same design as the dining room table. A decorative glass jar on top of the dresser is always well supplied with peanut M&M's. I grab a handful as I walk past it. The rest of the furniture in the room consists of a brown couch, a few brown leather easy chairs, some rickety wooden chairs and a small circular table in the corner of the room occasionally used for cribbage. The Christmas tree was located near this table when we celebrated an "old-fashioned" Christmas at the lodge.

My dad's side of my family always assembles at a family member's house during the Christmas season. However, when I was about nine years old we decided to have Christmas at the Leaning Tree Lodge.

I remember arriving at the lodge and seeing everything covered in snow. I had never been to the lodge in the winter, but had heard stories of my relatives' past canoeing adventures down the river the day after Christmas. Pine boughs sagged from the weight of the snow and the air was cold and still when we arrived. Once everyone had settled in we all set out together in search of a Christmas tree. We walked down the road to where the forest had been clear-cut to make space for high-voltage power lines. Small pines were growing in the clear-cut and we decided to look for our tree there. Our efforts were occasionally delayed by the eruption of snowball fights, everyone throwing at everyone.

We finally found the perfect little pine tree, so we cut it down and carried it back to the lodge. On returning to the lodge we knocked off all the snow on its branches and brought it inside. My dad had brought red ornament balls so we could decorate the tree. Everyone took a ball and made a design on it with Elmer's glue and gold sparkles. We placed the balls on the tree once they were dry. My relatives and I also made popcorn and cranberry strands for the tree. This was just one of the many great times spent at the lodge.

The dark brown brick fireplace in the corner of the room is rough to the touch and its



mantelpiece is used more often than its hearth these days. I glance to the left and my eyes meet those of a black bear hanging on the wall. My dad received the bear skin, complete with head and claws, as a gift from one of his bear hunting patients. My mom didn't think the bear skin fit the decor of our house very well, so we brought it over to the lodge.

A few years back, some of my cousins had a rather close encounter with, not a bear, but an old stuffed deer head as part of a joke my aunts and uncles played on them. It was a quiet night at the cabin and my cousins were sleeping outside in a tent. Some of my relatives decided it would be funny to scare them, so they went into the garage and found the deer head. They took it down from the wall and crept toward the tent. Holding the deer head near the tent flap, they scratched at the zipper. A quiet "who's there?" came for the tent, so they scratched again at the flap. Another "who's there?" emanated from the tent and when there was no answer the zipper started to move. They moved the deer head closer to the tent flap and someone shouted "it's a deer!" The flap quickly zipped shut and my cousins unzipped the flap on the other side of the tent and ran out, only to be greeted by my relatives' laughter.

The kitchen is beyond the fireplace. I look at the electric stove and smile to myself as I remember sitting in front of it with my mom and my brother, our feet in the open oven. At the time, the furnace wouldn't start and we were trying to stay warm any way we could. We were wearing hats and were wrapped up in blankets, shivering in front of the oven. It was a funny sight.

I notice the staircase leading to the second level as I come back to the front door. The first few polished wooden steps creak under my weight as I climb to the landing. On the landing, I scan the hat rack on the wall, looking for my favorite hat. The hat rack is covered with ancient hats for those who find themselves without a hat on a scorching summer day. My favorite, a blue and white Fisher Body baseball cap with plastic netting in the back, foam padding in front, and a creased brim, is underneath a green and white cap. I grab it and place it on my head as I proceed up to the second floor. A central corridor runs the length of the upstairs with a bedroom every few yards. There are no doors to the bedrooms, just curtains covering the

entrance of each room. My friends and I used to try and scare each other by jumping out from behind the curtains when we went to the lodge for “boys’ club.”

We had boys’ club for a few years when I was in elementary school. My friends —



Members of the boys’ club.

who were all boys — and their dads, as well as my dad and my brother, went to the lodge for a weekend each fall. We usually left right after school on a Friday to make the hour and a half trip from Traverse City to the lodge. Before it grew dark, we would set up the tents for those sleeping outside.

As it grew darker, we would walk down the dirt two-track until we came to another dirt



Roasting marshmallows around the campfire.

road branching off to the right. This road led to a clearing where most campfires were held. In the center of the clearing was the fire pit with charred pieces of wood and ashes leftover from the last fire. Our dads would get a fire going for us so we could roast

marshmallows and make s’mores. We would get branches from nearby trees and use them to hold our marshmallows next to the fire. Once we had stuffed ourselves with s’mores, we would find other ways to amuse ourselves underneath the starry sky. One time, we took almost empty Hi-C juice boxes and tossed them into the fire to see what would happen to them. Sizzling juice

bubbled out of the straw until the carton was engulfed in the flames; we thought it was pretty cool.

In the daytime, we would walk on the trails which led from the lodge to the clearing and then on to the public canoe landing and picnic area. We loved to explore the trails and the edge of the river which they followed. However, one time exploring turned particularly messy for my friend Mike.

One of the trails we were exploring had led us to a swampy area by the river. We were standing around wondering where we should go when someone suggested we try to jump over the bog in front of us. It sounded like a good thing to do at the time and Mike wanted to go first. We watched him as he stepped back a little bit and then ran forward, leaping at the edge of the muck.

He almost made it.

Mike came down a few feet short of solid ground and he immediately began to sink into the thick mud. He tried to step free of the mud's grasp and in doing so, lost his boot. I guess he hadn't tied his laces very tight, and when he tried to step, the mud held his boot firmly.

Meanwhile, we were all laughing on the side of the bog, barely able to control ourselves.

A large breakfast on Saturday or Sunday morning was another tradition of the boys' club. All of us would sit around the large wooden table and gobble

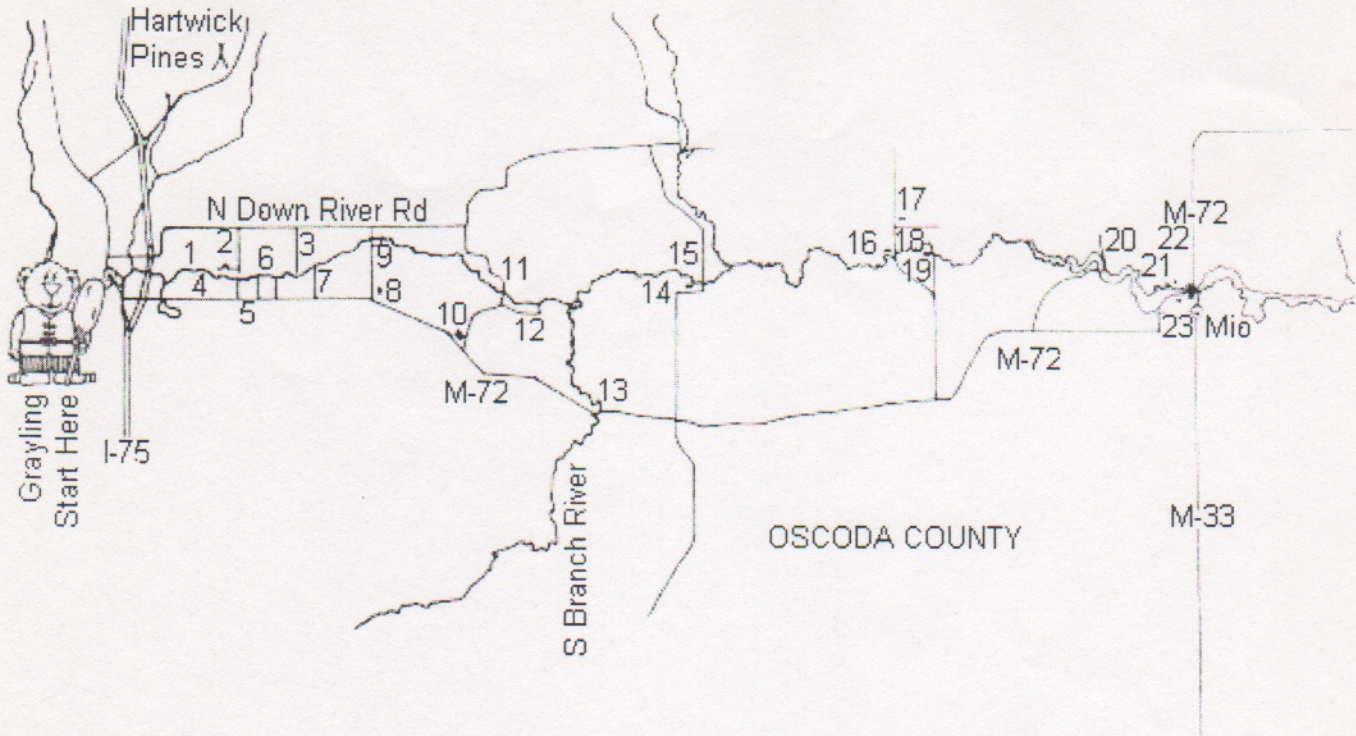


**Breakfast at the boys' club.**

the pancakes, bacon, toast, orange slices and orange juice our dads had prepared for us.

Looking back, I realize how truly special the time spent with my friends at boys' club

was. I have grown apart from some of them over the years, but I will always remember the times we had together. Today, my grandpa has passed the lodge down to his children. Everyone in my family has their own unique attachment to it which makes it special to them. Hopefully, it will continue to be an important place in my family for years to come and be shared with future generations.



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|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. State Forest Camp                  | 13. Smith Bridge                              |
| 2. Headquarters Road                  | 14. Store, Phone                              |
| 3. Whirlpool Road                     | 15. McMaster Bridge (8 1/2 hours)             |
| 4. Burtons                            | 16. State Forest Camp                         |
| 5. Louies                             | 17. Store, Phone (1/4 mile north)             |
| 6. Keystone                           | 18. Parmalee Bridge (11 hours)                |
| 7. Thendara                           | 19. Luzerne Township Park Camp (11 1/4 hours) |
| 8. Store, Phone (2 miles from river)  | 20. Campten Bridge (15 hours)                 |
| 9. Stephan Bridge (4 hours)           | 21. State Forest Camp                         |
| 10. Store, Phone (4 miles from river) | 22. Mio Dam (17 hours)                        |
| 11. Wakeley Bridge (5 1/2 hours)      | 23. Sportsmans Park Camp                      |
| 12. Town Line Road                    |   |