



I was not born in Ottawa County, but one county over, in Kent County, where people are of the opinion that they have urban street cred due to proximity to a mid-size city of some (well-deserved) repute. I lived for a time on the east side of the state, in Washtenaw County, where the prevailing attitude in the People's Republic of Ann Arbor was one of peace and love and high academic achievement with a whiff of herbal mellowing agents thrown in. I've done my fair share of traveling throughout this state and others, and even across the Pond to the Old Country to see how the folks lived before they emigrated to Chicago and Up North in Michigan. But since 1992, I have proudly and contentedly resided here, first on the eastern edge of Ottawa (Hudsonville) and now on the western front (West Olive). Here's what I've found that makes our county unique:

Sand. Lots of it. I believe it has been designated as the official sediment of Ottawa County. And why not? Sand is representative of our happy geological heritage. We don't mind it in our houses. Between our toes. In our food. Abrading our faces when we venture out to "the beach" in all sorts of weather. In fact, sand, as blown about on the Lake Michigan shoreline in November, is clinically proven to be a serviceable substitute for a pricey spa facial. I had never seen heavy excavating equipment employed to move sand off the road so that cars could pass until I moved to Ottawa County. Inland counties don't experience this. Now I eagerly await the annual phenomenon, as it is a harbinger of summer. Sure, many other counties have beaches and shoreline. Some have bigger and more famous dunes. Some probably have more linear miles of lakefront. But where else can you live or work a stone's throw from a vast inland sea accessible via beautiful parks of the State, County, and Township variety? I can tell you where you won't be: Kent County. Or Washtenaw County. Or Paris, France, my friend. Did you know that in Paris, they truck in tons of sand and dump it along the Seine River in August so that residents can get a sense of what it is like to be *a la plage*? I kid you not. Ottawa County Commissioners rest easy knowing they will never need to expend municipal funds to offer this type of experience to residents. My "yard" in West Olive ("yard" in the academic sense of the word only) consists of beach grass and pine needles. Even on the east side of the county there is plenty of sand. We farm it like corn. It is awesome.

Churches. This is a cliché, I know, as West Michigan is always bragging about its high concentration of churches, etc., etc. But it is TRUE, and very noticeable in Ottawa County -- not only the bricks and mortar churches, but the church culture that is so prevalent throughout our county. Even if you are not a church-going individual and are a fan of relativism or human secularism (see "People's Republic of Ann Arbor, above), our churches provides many benefits, not the least of which is a plethora of church cookbooks. Forget *Bon Appetit*. *Gourmet*. *Wine Spectator*. *Martha Stewart Living*. *Good Housekeeping*. If you want wicked good comfort food, gut-busting desserts, or a fantastic play-dough recipe, look no further than a church cookbook. They are everywhere, and every church publishes, minimally, twice per decade. Church ladies KNOW how to cook (sorry guys; I've seen but a tiny

smattering of recipes submitted by men folk – rigid sex roles is perhaps a topic for a future essay). Invariably, these recipes are time honored and have been perfected by multiple Sunday dinners and church potlucks. So you know you're getting a quality product. And the best part is if you have a question about something, you can probably hook up fairly easily with the recipe's author, who will – I guarantee you – be thrilled to coach you through your culinary preparation. Other benefits of churches: they give things (like food and clothing) to poor people, most of the time without judgment. They send packs of eager teenagers into the community to help the elderly with their lawn care or home maintenance. They stage spectacular Christmas shows for all to enjoy. And how cool is it that we now have a Buddhist community at the corner of 120th and Quincy? My husband, who grew up in rural Holland, tells of the old family joke whereby a "mixed marriage" in Ottawa County used to mean the groom was of the Christian Reformed sect and the bride was a Reformed Church in America gal. No more! Think of how much wedding angst has been eliminated now that everyone has relaxed on these matters.

Snowmelt. I know many people will mention this with enthusiasm. As well they should, unless they are fond of wet, cold socks, salt-stained footwear, and hideous boots that don't match their outfit. Do you know what it's like to have a new pair of shoes that you want to wear for a night out but you can't because it has just snowed 8 inches and you know the sidewalks will be full of snow and slush and your husband is not willing (or able) to carry you from the car to the restaurant? I can tell you what it's like – not good! Or, having to cope with the desire to shop unencumbered by boots the size of small fire plugs and weighing about as much – but erring on the side of caution and wearing them anyway? It's dreadful! Or wanting to take a run outside in the winter but not being able to because a) you will be killed by a passing snow plow due to lack of cleared sidewalks/bike paths; b) it is dark by 5:30 p.m. and that same snowplow will run you over because it can't see you, even with your precious little blinking-light headgear; or c) your fallback plan of using a treadmill at the gym is just too depressing to consider? It's a health hazard, that's what! Luckily, patrons of establishments in Holland and Grand Haven no longer have to make these difficult decisions because of forward-thinking citizenry who imagined and paid for heated sidewalks. I want to say this delightful technology resulted from a cozy public/private funding partnership, but I don't know that for certain and am too lazy to research it – the point is, it exists and my feet are very happy about it. I think we may surpass even Scandinavia in this regard, although this is conjecture as I have not been – but if the Swedes **DO** have heated sidewalks, they also have to live in cramped apartments and endure 9 months of dark winter, so this is still better.

Inland waterways. For many, access to Lake Michigan alone is enough of an intoxicant (see "Sand," above). But we Ottawans have choices. Want to tie up your boat at a nice restaurant? Check out the Piper, Boatwerks, Old Boys, or Snug Harbor. Feel like puttsing about on a Saturday morning with the paper and a cup of coffee? Put in at Pigeon Lake and throw out your anchor – then head over to the Sandy Point Beach House for lunch. Have a bit of wanderlust and a hankering for a brisk aquatic tour from north to south by way of our western boundary? Take a jaunt from Spring Lake to Lake Macatawa and then back again before dark. Jonesing for a thrilling zip on your Ski-Doo? You have your choice of numerous pocket lakes dotting Jenison, Hudsonville, Allendale, Coopersville, and all points north, south,

east, and west. Not to mention the Grand River, the Pigeon River, and the Black River. It's wet here. In a good way.

Deep Fried Dough. It may seem strange to include this in a list of characteristics that distinguish Ottawa County from others, but that is because there is room here for a scintilla of oddity, a dose of eccentricity, a dash of the absurd. Despite our provenance as sons and daughters of hard working and serious Dutch, Mexican, Asian, and Native American settlers, we Ottawa County residents embrace occasional weirdness, and where better to do that than at an old-fashioned fair or carnival? Elephant ears, corn dogs, carnies, tilt-a-whirls, people washing the **streets**, for heaven's sake – we love it all, from small-town fairs to a national festival celebrating a bulb imported from Turkey. Bring on the trans-fat. Once a year won't kill you.

There's more, but I will desist from further elaboration. Suffice it to say that I have grown fond of my adopted county. I may never leave. It has been a dynamite place to work, raise children, and make friends. I plan to continue enjoying the scenery for quite a while. Amen, and pass the sweet corn.