

Prologue

One afternoon in June 2020, I took a chair on the back porch of an old friend, Francis Blouin, the historian and archivist who served the University of Michigan for more than thirty years as director of the Bentley Historical Library.

The Bentley Library—unassuming in its low, dark-brick disguise at the edge of North Campus—is in fact the University’s treasure chest. Inside are the University’s own rich records and an enormous collection that documents the history of the entire state. Over the years, I had dipped into that storehouse often enough to draw out some 150 stories about the University’s history. Now I wanted to assemble some of them to make a book.

Fran Blouin was the one to ask for advice. He knew as much about the University’s history as anyone alive—more than I did, certainly. He was also a friend who had figured in my life for many years, not least by recruiting the young woman I would later marry to enroll in U-M’s master’s program in archives administration. (When I showed up for the first day of Professor Shaw Livermore’s “Jeffersonian America” in the fall of 1978, she was sitting in the back row. Good course. Some girl.)

Fran had read my brief proposal to the University of Michigan Press. He was for it, but with a proviso. Any such book, he said, should be more than just a collection of pieces already published. I had been on a journey through the University’s past, stopping here and there to stare at lost scenes. A reader would want to know what I had learned along the way. Where had I been inspired? Troubled? What did I think after these years of studying the place?

I saw his point. But what *did* I think, after all?



Fran and I were talking to each other at a discreet distance of eight feet. We were four months into the COVID-19 pandemic. We traded impressions of the plague's frightening effects on two campuses—the one in Ann Arbor, where both of us live and where I had gone to college as an undergraduate and graduate student, where my parents, my wife, and our two daughters had gone; and the one in Oxford, Ohio, where I teach narrative nonfiction at Miami University.

We had been thinking along the same lines. The coronavirus had chased students and professors out of real classrooms into the shallow, unsatisfactory sphere of “digital learning.” Now, suddenly, the whole long enterprise of the American university seemed to be trembling on its foundations. Maybe that was just a panicky passing thought. Maybe not.

For centuries, there had been no way to go to college but to literally *go*. Fledgling students who made the journey from home to a specific portion of ground—a campus with familiar buildings and idiosyncratic traditions, each with its own deeply felt sense of place—passed from childhood to adulthood on that ground. In the dormitories and the boarding houses, they met friends and lovers. In the classroom they met teachers who, if they were lucky, transformed their minds. And it was not only students who depended on being together in the flesh. Scholars and scientists searching for truths and creating new knowledge did their work through close contact with others—in the library and the laboratory, at the conference table.

Now, in a twinkling, a virus had erased all that, at least for a long moment. The students suddenly were gone. The campuses were empty and silent.

But the residential experience of college was endangered by more than a rampant virus. For years, skeptics had questioned the value of that experience. The enterprise had become far too costly, they said, and the internet was rendering it obsolete, anyway. A thousand faculties teaching essentially the same courses on a thousand campuses? Why, the whole thing could be done online with a fraction of the personnel at a fraction of the cost. Now the pandemic was proving it! Just look—millions of college students were still going to class, but in the safety of their homes!

In fact, I thought the virus was demonstrating how much would be lost if the residential campus were consigned to history. I had to look no further than the depressed and digitized faces of my own students, suddenly attending their classes through glass screens.

Until the pandemic, I had not thought very hard about why I wrote stories about U-M's history—apart from the fees I got from the editors of University publications. (I was, after all, a freelance writer for part of every working week.) I thought of these stories as something more than a hobby but less than a writerly calling. They provided a good excuse to satisfy my curiosity, and if I did the work well, then my fellow Michigan alumni might enjoy a little pleasurable reading.

But now, suddenly, the task of telling the University's old stories struck me as more important than that, even urgent. And as I pondered Fran's suggestion—to reflect on what I had learned, what these stories amounted to when summed up—I began to see that this work meant more to me than I'd realized. As I went back through the stories I'd written, I thought about how deeply my life was entwined with the place, like a thin green vine twisting up the trunk and limbs of an old oak.



I saw the campus for the first time at the age of seven or eight, in the mid-1960s. My parents, who graduated from the University in the spring before Pearl Harbor, would drive out from Detroit with my brother and sister and me to see football and basketball games and to stroll here and there. I remember only snapshots of these visits—college guys standing on the sagging roof of a front porch, shouting at passing cars; the great Cazzie Russell on the basketball floor at Yost Field House; the dimly lit pool hall at the Union.

In our basement at home, on a big wall map of the state of Michigan, I spotted what struck me as an odd, two-word name for a city. Then in a flash I realized this must be how you spelled the lyrical syllables I had heard my parents speak so often, as if they were run together in a single word, just as one of the city's founders, John Allen, had spelled them long ago—*Annarbour*.

I enrolled as a freshman in 1974. Technically, I majored in history, but my true major was the *Michigan Daily*. Like any good college journalist, I may have skipped one in three of the classes I was supposed to attend, not so much to report stories as to hang out with my pals in the glorious old news-room of the Student Publications Building at 420 Maynard.

I loved the *Daily*. But soon after graduation, I decided I wanted to be a historian. So I re-enrolled, this time for a PhD. I met my wife and we started a family.

I loved the time I spent as a doctoral student. But after a while, I sensed that I was not cut out to be an academic historian.

So, doctorate in hand, I flipped back to journalism, raising puzzled eyebrows among family and friends. For twelve years I went to work every day as a reporter at my hometown newspaper, the *Detroit News*. For four of those years I covered higher education and wrote many stories about U-M. In this role I was supposed to bury my loyalties and study the place with a journalist's critical eye.

I roasted the University of Michigan more than once. For example, in 1992, I wrote an extended portrait of intellectual alienation among undergraduates living in South Quad. In the course of my interviews, the chair of the English Department conceded on the record that he would not want his own son to enroll at Michigan. After the stories were published, the professor—now very unhappy with me—informed my employers at the *News* that he did not recognize the “misshapen caricatures” I had written about. “We love these students,” he said. “They are the reason most of us would never leave.”

Actually, a couple years later, he did leave. Come to think of it, he left not long after he helped to deep-six U-M's century-old curriculum in journalism. Coincidence?

My view of the place had grown more complex. But I never found a reason not to believe that of all our society's embattled institutions, the college and the university embody our best hope of living in a dominion of reason and perpetual renewal.

After the *News* I went on my own as a freelancer. I wrote in the genre where my two paths, history and journalism, converged. The genre is called popular history—narratives built out of careful research but intended for readers who want to read about the past simply as a story, not as a pitched battle between arguing academics.

I wrote books about people distant from me in time and space—the great war correspondent Ernie Pyle; the Wright brothers and their rivals in the early days of human flight; Franklin Roosevelt and his struggle with polio.

But my home turf beckoned, too.

For *Michigan Today*, the digital monthly that goes to Michigan’s global throng of alumni, I wrote a story about Avery Hopwood, the tortured playwright who founded Michigan’s Hopwood Awards. It was fun to write that story. So I went to John Lofy, my friend and *Michigan Today*’s editor, and asked, “How about if I write a monthly piece about U-M history?” I would avoid the usual rah-rah stuff, I said. I would look for stories no one knew or for fresh angles on familiar tales.

“Sure,” John said, “let’s try it.”

Story followed story, year after year.

When the University’s 2017 bicentennial began to peek over the far horizon, I met with another friend, Kim Clarke, a veteran journalist who had joined the University’s staff as an in-house writer. (She served, among other roles, as speechwriter to President Mary Sue Coleman.) Kim asked me to help her plan a new digital publication to be called the University of Michigan Heritage Project. Under her editorship, I began to write much longer stories than my articles in *Michigan Today*, though I kept writing for *Michigan Today*, too, now run by a new editor, Deborah Holdship.

Some pieces had a sharp edge of self-criticism—sharp enough that the occasional alumnus asked why the University would publish such a thing on its own websites. But all three editors—John, Kim, and Deborah—believed as I did that frank reporting about the University’s past, including its dark moments, would win more favor among its constituents than any sugary diet of feel-good chatter. Anyway, I wasn’t writing to help or hurt the University’s reputation. I just liked telling the stories.



Time had to pass before I could say exactly why I chose not to be an academic historian. Finally I understood. Scholarly historians are in the business of analysis. They amass evidence, then construct arguments about cause and

effect. And I was not much of an analyst. I had few big ideas. My talent as a writer, such as it was, was to tell true stories—to say (a) happened, then (b), then finally (c), with a reflection or two along the way. I prefer not to be the one who tries to explain what it all means.

So I've decided that my response to Fran Blouin's questions—What had I learned? What did all this work add up to?—can only be to show that many of the stories I've written grew from some fragment of my own entanglement with the place. This may give a reader some sense of how one student's life can be so profoundly shaped by a university, and of how grateful one ought to feel for the long work of the many generations who envisioned and built and sustained the place, whatever its imperfections and errors.

Thinking about all this, I remembered something that one of my writer-heroes, the essayist and author E.B. White, said in a letter to a young reader of *Charlotte's Web*. She had asked what White was trying to say in his novel about a spider who saves the life of a young pig. He replied: "All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world. I guess you can find that in there, if you dig around."

That's my answer to my friend Fran, who asked what I'd learned about the University of Michigan—simply that I love the institution on which I've spun much of the web of my life, and that I hope it will survive and thrive to nourish more lives to come. I guess you can find that in here.