

I first met Archie in the summer of 1938, I was on vacation and tenting at Echo Township Park. The fishing on Six Mile Lake was good and the wild undeveloped shore line and the absence of people added up to peaceful tranquility that appealed to me. I decided to buy a spot on the Lake if I could find someone who wanted to sell.

The road to Ellsworth ran parallel to the Lake and I started out on the twisting sandy road that was little more than deep rutted wagon tracks that wound around an occasional second growth tree. The sand was deep and loose in the tracks and if a car was met, it meant backing and sawing to get out of the ruts to let the other car pass.

After traveling north about two miles, I saw the bent figure of a man working in a sandy garden beside the road, no house was visible and except for the little clearing for the garden, all was wild growth. As my car neared the man, he straightened up and stared. When I slowed to a stop, he came striding out apparently eager for human company. He walked bent forward at about a twenty degree angle from the hips and seemed to limp on both legs if that is possible. Anyway his gait was erratic and shambling but the stride was long and he moved deceptively fast, placing each foot in a straight line and toes pointing in the line of travel with no turning out of the feet. He walked like an Indian used to following a narrow path. As he neared the car I noticed his clothes were of rough texture and hung in sagging wrinkles. His face was far from handsome, boney, beetling brows and wild coarse eyebrows projected out above deep eye sockets and the most striking feature was a pair of bulging icy blue eyes that blinked often, then opened very wide and staring before the next blink. Prominent cheekbones and a heavy jaw was covered with at least two months growth of gray beard and on his head a heavy woolen, red plaid, hunter's cap was pulled down over a wild thatch of coarse gray hair that grew into two large coarse ears. The stare of those icy blue eyes so wide open and then the blink and again the stare made me think of an owl.

By way of opening the conversation, I asked, Can you tell me if any of this farm land along the lake is for sale? Then with his answer came the biggest surprise of all. He obviously was afflicted by an acute speech impediment.

His face contorted and with difficulty with throat cords and Adams apple working spasmodically he said, Hee, Hee, Hee, farm land?

With difficulty, struggling not to show how startled and surprised I was, I answered, Yes, I would like to buy some land on the lake.

Again came the facial contortions and the stumbling, Hee, Hee, Hee. Tain't no good for farmin, can't grow nothin but beans and squash and mebbly buckwheat, but even then it'll run out in for or five years.

But I don't want it for farming, I just want a place to build a hunting and fishing cabin.

Hee, Hee, Hee, Guess it'd do fer that alright, but hunting ain't what it was, nor fishin neither. If you are set on having a cabin

around here I guess you can find somebody who will sell you a piece of land. But I, Hee, Hee, Hee, don't know nobody that wants to sell right now.

I thanked him and drove on my way and did not see him again until three years later when I bought the forty acres that joined his land on the north. We did mention him at times and always referred to him as Old Hee, Hee.

Eight years after that first meeting with Old Hee, Hee, we moved into our cabin as his nearest neighbor. He was a nonconformist by choice and had worked out a simple routine of life that suited his temperament and environment as he found it.

Certain incidents that transpired gave us an insight into his life both present and past. One such incident was when he rode with me into Ellsworth to the grocery store for his bi-monthly supply of food. Archie went into the store and standing in front of the meat counter he began fumbling through the pockets of his old stained brown hunting coat and the pockets of his thick gray Soo wool lumber-jack pants. Henry VanderArk who owned the store asked in his pleasant voice. "What can I get for you today, Archie?" "Hee, Hee, Chsee, Shee, nothin dammit, I lost my slip that I had it all wrote on."

Well, Henry had been catering to Archie's needs for so long that he knew from the past what he bought, with seldom any variation. So, Henry said, well let me guess and maybe I can remind you of some of the things you had on your list. Did you need bacon squares?
 "Yup, that's one of the things, gimme two pounds."
 "Do you need vegetable beef soup."
 "Yup, gimme six cans, them tall ones."
 "Do you need coffee,"
 "Yup, but give me boilin coffee, I don't want no regurgalatin nor no drip soakin coffee, when I make coffee I boil it till them beans roll and every bit of the bitter best comes out of em."
 "How about condensed milk?"
 "Gimme four small cans of Pet, the big cans sour afore I use it up."
 So on it went until Archie's shoulder bag was full. He had this old canvas bag with a shoulder strap on it as he had been in the habit of walking the four miles into town and carrying his groceries some that way.

I got into my pickup truck and started back home and on the way Archie said, "Hee, Hee, that Henry VanderArk is a sharp one. Must be some kind of a Prophet, cause he thought of everything I had on my list."

As a result of such incidents and clues picked up from the rare visits of his relatives, I came to know about Archie's past and his life after coming to live on the point.

Archie was the oldest in a family of four boys and one girl. Archie's father was a worker in the lumber mills around Muskegon. He died when Archie was still young, around twelve years of age, and those days before child labor laws were enacted, the burden of feeding and housing his brothers and sister fell heavily on Archie. As a result he did not go to school.

lot were of the hardest of manual labor. For many years he worked at a foundry called the Malleable Iron Works. The heavy lifting, wheeling, and stacking of the heavy iron pigs took a toll of his body and an accidental toppling of a stack of pig iron crushed his legs and feet. He recovered enough to walk but ever after he was bent forward from the waist and his legs seemed like the legs of a crawfish out of water and seemed to move in response to irregular impulses like a puppet moved by many strings.

The two brothers next to Archie in age did not get much more schooling than Archie but managed better jobs and married and went their own ways. The youngest brother and his sister stayed in school, at Archies expense and reached an average station in life. As the others grew older and acquired stability and a fair level of prosperity while Archie remained a low paid day laborer and they were embarrassed by him before their acquaintances. Archie was sensitive to the others attitude toward him and when hard times came in 1921 he was laid off his job and knowing that none of his relatives wanted him to live with them, he decided to come north and find some cut-over land that he could buy cheap from some lumber company. When he found the Point on Six Mile Lake it appealed to him as a secluded sanctuary safe from jibes of other people.

He never was married and being homely and shy no girl or woman was ever attracted to him. So I was startled one day when he showed me a scrap book that he had been a long time in filling. The scrap book contained pictures of Brides and Brides and Grooms in their Wedding clothes. What hidden depths of loneliness were indicated by the revelation of such an unexpected interest.

Archie spent many a daylight hour reading. In fiction he liked Adventure stories. In History, he liked to read about the Civil War, partly I suppose because both his Maternal and Paternal Grandfathers served with the Union Forces throughout the War.

At last I had the picture of a timid, sensitive, individual who had sacrificed his own personal interests in order to give his brothers and sister the advantages that he had missed, and at last when his luck had run out and keenly feeling the shame that his family felt toward him, he sought out a remote, secluded spot far from those who could hurt him.

I have tried to give you a picture of a kind, generous person who was hurt so badly by those closest to him that he became a recluse on his beloved point by the lake. Now with this picture in mind, I think you are ready to hear about Archie and His Mouse.

It was one of those severe winters that come every few years to Northern Michigan. The snow came early in November and kept on coming without let up. The temperature slid down lower week by week until at last the fence posts were almost covered and in fact in places where the drifts formed the fence posts were covered and the cold winter winds blew the snow into ever deeper drifts. At night the frozen tree trunks cracked and creaked as the winds blew hard against them. Then on the still clear nights which are always the coldest of all the trees boomed from the expansion of the moisture in the wood expanding with the frost.

The Mail delivery was erratic because of blocked roads. The Mailman failed to get through for days at a time but we had nothing to do, or rather there was nothing we could do except shovel the snow from our roofs and try to keep the snow away from the doors so they could be opened. It was on one of those days that I slogged my way out to the mailbox at the County road and met Archie out there as his mailbox was only about a hundred feet from mine.

Hi, Archie, I said. Then began a chain of such meetings at the mailbox and in the conversations that took place out there between the snowbanks thrown up on each side of the road by the snowplows, lies the following tale of Archie, the spurned and lonesome recluse.

I won't write the torturous Hee, Hees that he always had to go through before he could start a sentence, nor will I use quotation marks. For the sake of brevity the following paragraphs will be first and second party conversations that took place day after day at the mailbox, as the story unfolded.

Hi, Archie, It really got down cold last night didn't it?

Sure did, and the old lake boomed good and loud and real steady and it must have got way below towards mornin cause it really got crackin hard, an I couldn't get no sleep till after daylight. Say, I got a mouse in my cabin and I had em all trapped out last fall when the cold started to set in. So this one has come to the cabin just lately. I saw him this mornin just as the light got strong enough that I could see him. He was settin there nibblin on a bacon rind that I left on a plate by the stove. He don't seem very wild and he's got the shiniest black eyes you ever see. He stayed on the table nibblin and watchin me till I got out of bed and he stayed right there a twitchin his nose and blinkin them black eyes at me till I was so close I tried to grab him. He just jumped off the table and ran over and scampered up on the top of my trunk, then he just set right there and cocked his head sideways and watched me while he used his front paws to wipe the grease off his mouth and whiskers. I watched him for the longest time and he is fat and his hide is slick as can be. He probably had a good supply of grub stashed away in his winter nest and his appetite was so good he ate it all up then had to get out and hunt another place to eat. He sure is in good rig for this time of year, been eatin good. I got busy makin my bed and bringin in more wood for the stove and kind of forgot him for awhile and when I looked for him again he was gone from the trunk and I couldn't find him anywhere in the cabin.

I got to thinkin that maybe he had headed back to his winter burrow, and so I went outside and circled the cabin and found his tracks leading in to the cabin but no tracks heading away from the cabin. So I knew that he was still in the cabin. I followed his cabin-bound tracks for two hundred yards over crust covered drifts and every step pointed straight to my cabin. He had to know right where he was going from past experience or he was following the smell cause any animal can smell people for a long ways. We must stink somethin awful to them. Well I got to wade on back to my place and see if my mouse is waiting for me.

A day or two later the weather had moderated and we met again at the mailbox.

Hello Archie, anything new since I saw you last?

Nope nuthin new, just some more of the same. Say that mouse I told you about, he is a real corker. Smartest damn mouse I ever see and tame too. He sets on the table across from me at mealtimes and eats anything I put there for him. I tried to trap him but always find the trap sprung and the bait missing. I set the trap as light as I could and stayed awake for hours when the moon was out so I could see in the cabin and that damn mouse rooted under the trap with his nose and turned it over to make it spring, then he ate the bait. Now how did he know it was safe after the trap was sprung? I have named him Mosby after that Confederate raider in the Civil War. Well I got a trick that he don't know about. I'm going to fill a crock about three inches full of water and balance the bait on the end of a piece of shingle leanin against the edge of the crock and over the water, when that Mosby mouse crawls up the shingle to get at the bait the whole thing will tip with his weight and dump him into the water, the sides of the crock are so steep and slippery that he won't get out.

Next time at the box.

Frank, that damned mouse didn't walk the plank like I planned, he pushed the flat piece of shingle off the crock and et up the bait, then he sets on the other side of the table and blinks at me in a knowin kind of way. I'll get him though, Mice can't resist chocolate candy and I've got some chocolate drops in a fruit jar. I am going to hang a piece of candy on a string over the crock and put the piece of shingle back for him to walk up. Just pushing the shingle off the crock won't work again cause the candy will still be hangin over the crock so now he has got to walk the plank to get the candy.

Again;

That Mosby fooled ~~a~~ again, he jumped from the top of the window ledge to the string and crawled down the string and ate the candy, I thought I had him though cause how could he help but fall into the crock? Well he just got that string a swingin and when he swung clear of the crock he just plunked down on the table and set there an I am sure he was grinnin at me.

Did you ever hear tell of such a smart mouse in all your borned days? I been readin "Riders of the Purple Sage" by Zane Gray and I read pretty slow on account of my schoolin, well lately that mouse has been up to so many comical didos that I aint gittin nowhere with my book. I am spendin so much of my time watchin that mouse and tryin to figure a way to outsmart him that I just don't get to nuthin else. I got a plan now though, when I was comin from town yesterday I stopped at Art Carpenters and soaked a bit of yarn in the acid in his tractor battery.

Next time at the mailbox Archie looked as though his last friend had deserted him.

What's the matter Archie, don't you feel good today?

No I feel punk but it is a lot better than I deserve I guess.

What do you mean by that?

Ahhh hell, you mind me tellin you about soakin a bit of yarn in Art's battery acid? Don't you?

Well I tied another chocolate candy on the string over the crock and then I tied the soaked yarn on the string up near the ceiling. I think Mosby was suspicious cause he didn't try for the candy all day long and he hadn't tried for it when I went to sleep last night. This morning the string was gone from below where I tied the yarn and when I looked in the crock there was Mosby drowned. Course he couldn't know that the acid ate at the string until it no longer would hold his weight and when he jumped and grabbed it, it broke and let him fall into the crock. If I had been awake I would have fished him out, but by the time I woke up it was too late. Poor little feller, all he wanted was to come in and be company, and that he sure was.

A coarse sleeve wiped at a tear.

Why the hell did I have to try to catch him anyway? I tell you that of all the animals on God's green earth, man is the most hateful, meanest and dirtiest in soul and body. I sure wish he was still around for company and if I had it to do over again I would just be friends to him like he wanted to be to me. We always know too late what we ought to do, what they call hind sight. Wouldn't it be great if we could all somehow plan to live with hind-sight instead to doing the Devils' biddin all the time. I once heard a old Preacher say, and I know it is in the Bible too, Store up treasurers in Heaven for use in Eternity. Now you suppose that we are just here a storin up Hind-sight to be used in the next life? That would be Heaven alright but right now that I didn't have no hind-sight to go by I feel like Hell.

He hiked off back toward his cabin with gloom hangin all around him.

Now you have heard the story of Archie and His Mouse.

The poor old recluse who had been so deeply hurt by those to whom he had given so much was now most repentant for being guilty of doing to his friend the mouse, as the world had done to him.
