

MOON



There was a time when I would have been angry about what's happening in Moon Valley. I can remember many nights sitting up late with a friend, drinking and talking over what to do about it. We talked about defending it.

That was ten years ago, at least, when we talked about how much we feared for Moon Valley's future. Even then we could see it coming: someone was bound to build on it. It was simply too much land to leave alone. At times, we felt like the only ones who believed that the valley was worth saving. After all, it was nothing but a sand mine.

As I write this, on a rainy night in a landlocked city, I would not be surprised to learn that in one or two kitchens within walking distance of the valley rim people are sitting up, talking about this place. A Chicago developer has bought most of Moon Valley and intends to build one hundred houses there. Unless they are speaking of real estate, when people talk about Moon Valley now they are talking about the past. Anger has given way to loss.

This is about how we understand history and how we pass that understanding on.

I was born and raised in Chicago—like my parents and their parents before them. My grandparents worked their

BY DAVID HOPPE

VALLEY



way from inner city to the residential north side; my parents moved on to the northwest suburbs. About this time my grandparents bought a cottage at Stop 16, outside Michigan City, Indiana.

The cottage, set on a dune amid oak trees and blueberry bushes, had belonged to some Episcopalian sisters, former missionaries to China, who had left the tongue-and-groove walls bedecked with mementoes of their journey to the East.

Although I never saw it, my grandfather used to say that the deed to this place had names on it extending back to the Indians. Standing outside in the dappled light of sway-

ing oaks, this boy could easily believe that Indian time was not so long ago.

With Lake Michigan not five minutes away, "the cottage" as we called it—Grace Dieu the sisters named it—became our family's summer place. My parents might bring me out on Saturday and I'd stay the week with my grandparents.

There was a house next door. The boy who lived there had the same name as me. I wish I could remember how we met. I am sure of just one thing: it could not have been long before David took me to Moon Valley.

This would have been during the 1950s. In those days Michigan City had a bustling main street running north

almost to the lake. There was the Spalding Hotel; two movie houses, the Tivoli and the Lido; Vail's candy-stripe painted hobby shop and the bookstore run by those dis-creet bohemian types connected with the summer theater. Visitors rented accommodations at Mother Goose cottages by Washington Park and on Saturday night rode the Ferris wheel there, the merry-go-round, and the wild mouse. You could win prizes. One man sold baby alligators in red and green cardboard boxes.

A bus took us from downtown to the beach road, then east out of Michigan City and into Long Beach. Bus stops were at numbered intervals: 14, 15, 16. . . . We got off at 16

SAND MINE

which the Indiana dunes are well known.

A fine sugar sand that yelps underfoot when scuffed. Sand sought after for the making of glass.

Oak trees came right to the edge of the sandy drop-off, branches and roots protruding over and through the escarpment in which cliff swallows made their homes. We were perhaps 150 feet above the valley floor. It seemed like a mile.

We got down by leaping. Over the brink with one long stride, catching the slope on the way down, sinking ankle-



and followed the blacktop road over the hill that once was a sand dune, descending into an oak forest settled with cottages and bungalows.

The mailboxes for our stop were nailed in a row along a horizontal beam. The one for David's family was there, and ours, and, at the end, one that was rusty and faded, with Moon Valley hand painted in black upon its side.

David and I got there by turning our backs on the lake, climbing over one wooded dune, then pushing through the underbrush and mounting another. Here the sand was dove grey with oak dust, flecks of bark, and acorns. Wild grapevines and blueberry brush caught our ankles. We pulled ourselves forward, grabbing the slender trunks of dogwood trees. As we approached the valley rim the sky seemed to open overhead, suddenly blue, unobstructed by the canopy of towering oaks.

We reached the edge, breathing hard. Blue jays cawed, "Thief, Thief." The white sand bottom of Moon Valley ran east to west below.

That sand was a sight, so bright and hot beneath the afternoon sun. It was not until much later that I would learn how the valley got its name. The sand reflected moon glow as readily as sunlight; standing on it, cool and blue, was like standing on the moon. This was the same sand as that found at the beach, the so-called "singing sand" for

deep in sand, gravity pulling us the rest of the way, sand streaming down in daggers behind, our arms through the air like wings.

At the bottom we fell to our knees. Our shoes bulged with warm sand, our feet were packed in it. We pulled off our shoes, laughing at the sand that poured out when we tipped them sideways.

There had been no sand mining in the valley for some time. Things were wild again—it got that way if left alone long enough. The valley could reclaim itself in as little as a couple of years when given the chance.

My first day in Moon Valley came during the course of a long mining hiatus. We could tell this because railroad tracks that had once been laid to help carry sand out in steel dump cars looked a hundred years old. The sand's constant, subversive action had undermined and broken up the rails. Black, creosote-stained ties were half buried and strewn at seasick angles down the course of the valley like charred bones. As we walked we kicked up rusty iron spikes. I picked the first one up, then a second and a third. There were more—too many to carry. I dropped the lot so as not to fall behind David.

We followed the tracks into a tree-enshrouded bottle-neck. Although I did not notice them at the time, David and I were passing occasional pear and apple trees; had we tried them that day, the wild grapes would have been sweet.

David pointed out a serpentine indentation, like a whisper, across the surface of the sand. Snake, he told me, probably a puff adder.

Where I came from, the last snake had been driven off the last vacant lot before I was born. The thought of coming upon one here, that this was a reptile's native habitat, quickened my blood and chilled it at the same time.

But we didn't find a puff adder that day. What David wanted to show me was the old railroad crane.

It was as big as a brontosaurus. The cab was fixed to a flatcar; somehow the boom was frozen almost upright. A rusty chain of steel X's joined the boom's twin beams,

departed, then went down to uncouple cars and balance stones on the rails.

We returned the next day to find business as usual.

I asked my parents why these men mined the sand. They told me they had heard it was being used as fill for a building project at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Over the years, David and I gradually drifted apart. I went to the valley by myself. I learned things there: the names of plants like horehound and scouring rush; how, if I sat and did nothing, the sounds of the forest could enfold me like a cloak. I saw my first puff adder, grey fox,



ascending like a ladder to treetop height. We scrambled on board. The cab door was gone, someone or something had gotten away with the operator's seat. I could move the shift forward if I pressed with both hands.

Supposedly there was a shack further up the line. David said an old hermit lived there; that mailbox with Moon Valley painted on it was his. He kept a pack of mangy dogs around the place—going back there was not a good idea.

It would be years before I did. In the meantime, that end of the valley I had already seen was a feast of woods, marsh, and tall grasses. Frogs went silent and turtles slid into ponds glistening with lilies and decomposing leaves when David and I passed by. We sat on a dead stump at the foot of a blowout. Maybe David had never been in this place with someone who seemed to see it the same way he did. We became good friends that day. Our imaginations met in that landscape.

The mining began again. A fresh set of railroad tracks was hammered into the sand. David and I watched the workmen do it, the two of us flat on our bellies on top of the dune. We watched through army field glasses brought back from the war in Europe, muttering back and forth about what right did they have to be digging up "our valley." Ours was the righteous anger of boys raised on westerns and recycled war movies like *Objective Burma* and *A Walk in the Sun*. We waited until dusk, when the men

salamander. Crouched by the edge of a pond, I listened as the voices of frogs rose—singly at first, then in rampant chorus—filling the air with primordial music.

Mining continued in violent, seemingly random cycles. Where a pond and stand of cottonwoods were found one summer, a stripped sand flat was the next. Acres were bulldozed at a time, leaving nothing but the broad tracks of earth-moving machines. Oak trees were uprooted and stacked at the margins of this work. Coming upon them was like stumbling across an elephant's graveyard.

Then, unaccountably to us, the mining would cease. Green shoots flecked the barrens. In another year the cottonwood trees were back. There might be a dense clump of marram grass, the tall spires of mullein, bulrushes where another brackish pond bled through.

Whenever I could, I took my friends to Moon Valley. Inevitably they said they had never seen a place like it. We looked for remnants of the old man's shack. It was long gone, as was the crane. But the search led us down pathways and out into parts of the valley I had never known before. We walked westward almost a mile, finding more plant life, ponds, and, all along the way, the rugged faces of sand dunes banked up against Lake Michigan's horizon.

Summer Place

Our Valley We usually found fresh mining sites as well. The cycles seemed to call for mining in one section of the valley at a time, sometimes for a duration of two or three years. Then the section was given a rest. Another section was selected and stripped of whatever growth had taken hold.

In recent years, residents in homes within walking distance and earshot of Moon Valley began complaining that the vibration of machines was causing cracks in their masonry and plaster. They claimed encroachment on the valley's north wall was turning into "blowback," an erosion not just of dunecrest but also of adjacent property lines.



It was during this time that I moved to Michigan City. I found a job there, working in the public library, that saw me through for eight years—from 1980 to 1988. I lived on a dune at the western end of Moon Valley. My old friend David lived not two blocks away.

A passing glance might have left you doubting that David and I had anything in common but the happenstance of a shared first name. He was a power company lineman, capable of climbing several stories to the top of a steel pole; a man used to working in the elements, physical risk (with scars to prove it), and the exigencies of union politics. I worked in a library. A lot of David's friends told me they had seen the public library before, knew where to find it, had heard it was serviceable. I had as much to say about things they waxed on about: stock car engines, electronic appliances, bars.

Nevertheless, David and I began hanging out together. Talking about Moon Valley. Soon we were hiking back there, making our own assessments of damage done and taking heart where we found renewal. What that first glance at David and I would have missed was the history we shared—our knowledge of the valley.

We knew the place was endangered. There had never been a time when it wasn't. Stripped and plundered, it still survived. In certain sections it remained almost exactly as it had been when we first explored it. Coming upon such

places, standing in that light and hearing those sounds made the long curves of our separate lives seem wholly perceptible and palpably intertwined.

We talked about defending Moon Valley. About fighting back. Ways of sabotaging earth movers, spreading rumors of old toxic waste. Elsewhere in the Midwest an ecological outlaw known only as the Fox had successfully played havoc with a variety of polluters, developers, and other assorted eco-exploiters. We imagined ourselves playing that role in Moon Valley. In the kitchen, David's wife looked up—we were beginning to sound serious.

But talking about direct action was really not so much

about action as it was a way of expressing a depth of feeling. One afternoon we stood together in Moon Valley and agreed that neither of us would ever be rich or landed; we wouldn't be leaving our kids businesses or estates. What people like us left our children was history. We could bring our kids to this place, show it to them, share it. This was not a history made of words, it was personal. Real. It was all we had.

The Chicago developer and his partners plan on building as many as one hundred homes in Moon Valley. They call their project Beachwalk, after the faux Victorian boardwalk they have built to connect their development with the beach. Plans are also afoot to accessorize Beachwalk with a gazebo or two to lend this ready-made neighborhood a certain air—the village in that eccentric TV series "The Prisoner" comes to mind.

A local attorney seems to express the official city position on the development when he raves in the local newspaper: "This is a very exciting project. . . . It will be very good for Michigan City. It provides a residential development in a more moderate bracket than we have been seeing along Lake Shore Drive." Houses in this "moderate bracket" are expected to cost between \$150,000 and \$225,000 each.

Environmentalists have had little to say **STRIPPED SAND FLAT**

on the valley's behalf. Of interest are the comments of a technical assistant for the Save the Dunes Council. In March 1990 this person told the *Michigan City News-Dispatch* that the developer's proposal might be all right because, according to the newspaper's report, "The homes would almost certainly attract higher income, better educated residents who . . . tend to be more knowledgeable about the [environmental] issues."

In the same article, Michigan City's mayor claimed he had not yet seen the developer's plans, but he called the development a good idea anyway.

STRIPPED AND PLUNDERED



Given its geographic context, Michigan City's history of environmental stewardship would have to be considered better than that of its other Northwest Indiana neighbors. The area, somehow, was spared the massive industrialization of nearby Gary and Hammond. One cannot help but wonder why. From the turn of the century until the present, duneland has looked like a hole waiting to be filled to a lot of people.

Maybe it's the sand. Some people seem to view it as an almost hostile medium—shifty, colorless, intrusive, and nasty in the eyes. Sand must suggest the desert for these folks, dying of thirst, disorientation, colonial fever. By such lights, sand is to be gotten rid of, shipped away and covered up.

How convenient that others are willing to pay for it. By the trainload or the acre.

Hoosier Slide, the tallest dune on the Lake Michigan coast, stood as high as two hundred feet, overlooking Michigan City's harbor. When markets for sand emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, enterprising businessmen followed their eyes to the biggest pile of sand in sight. No matter that the Slide was the city's foremost landmark and attraction. In thirty years it was a memory, the future site of a power plant.

Now, instead of a sand dune, a cooling stack is the most prominent feature on Michigan City's skyline. But in a

dilapidated old neighborhood near the new outlet mall—a section that might have sheltered workers who helped to haul the Slide away—sand, not grass, filters up through the uneven brick sidewalk. Sand blows across the street and scrapes on bowed front steps. It is everywhere, like a vestigial memory of Lake Michigan's greatest dune.

Memory is all that will be left of Moon Valley. Children who play there will explore a world of subdivided lots, grass seed, and paving that their counterparts living in truly "moderate" housing further inland will only dream of and resent. My friend David will have no reason to bring his offspring there. What, besides the latest model homes, will

he have to show them? No wonder we are so fascinated by oral histories. With the passing of entire landscapes—the disappearance of places—memories, and the words we choose to convey them, are all that can be shared across generations.

I have been told that the first dozen houses will mean \$2 million worth of construction—a significant amount of work for a community where good paying jobs have been scarce for years. Michigan City's tax base has been eroding like the sand these houses will be built upon; Beachwalk can help in that department, too.

Late at night, people I know in Michigan City will sit together over Jack Daniels and canned beer. Maybe they will talk about Moon Valley, about how it felt to spy a grey fox back there or to hear the songs of frogs. More likely, they will talk about the continuous present of money—who's making it, who's spending it, and what it buys. This will go on for awhile, until everybody gets tired. The room grows quiet. Then someone will stand up and say so long.

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Memory