

MICHIGAN A NEW CHAPTER

George's new job as an instructor at MSU was a lucky break. An art department member was going on sabbatical and they needed a half-time member in the audio-visual department as well. George was uniquely qualified for both. It was a one-year appointment, but it was a start.

We decided to buy a car and drive out there. George cashed in his war bonds for a down payment, and we bought a brand new Ford sedan. It was the day before the Korean war started. When he went back the next day to sign the contract, the dealer upped the price by \$200.

My parents were living on Long Island at the time, and planned a going-away party for us. The day before we were due to leave we picked up my aunt Kate and drove out. Unfortunately, before we got there, George, a new driver, rear-ended a car in traffic. In those days, cars were much less safe. I was sitting in the front passenger seat. On impact, my seat back leaned forward. My aunt, behind me, flew into the windshield and hit her head. She spent the whole time at the party in bed. Fortunately, the injury was not serious. But her insurance company sued us, and we were covered. Our insurance company paid her enough for a trip to Europe.

Our car was damaged; the right front headlight had to be replaced and the dented fender straightened out. We had planned to leave first thing in the morning, but were lucky to get underway by late afternoon. So our first stop was a motel in New Jersey. The rest of the trip was uneventful. When we arrived in East Lansing George got in touch with Professor Church, the head of the department, who took us to the apartment that had been reserved for us. It was part of a temporary barracks complex that was set up on campus to cope with the explosive post-war student body at the university. When he unlocked the door and I looked inside, my first thought was "we came all the way for this?" The living room was small and contained a large heating unit taking up a great deal of the space; a small kitchen, and a small bedroom. That was it. In the back was a "garden" of limited space. We were part of two rows of barracks with a walkway down the center which led to the

parking lot. The population was limited to students with families and new young faculty like us. We were allowed to live there for two years only. Since these were families, there were children. We came to know it as “fertile valley”. We followed suit, and next year Andy was born.

George met his colleagues, a number of them who were also just hired. The following were some of the art department people I remember:

Lou Raynor – an older member of the department, a very good ceramist of some reputation.

Chuck Pollack- older brother of Jackson Pollack. He taught calligraphy and was a wonderful dancer. He bought our house from the people who bought it from us. He eventually moved to Paris, where he spent the rest of his life.

Murray and Janet Jones- Murray was a painter. He died of a disease contracted one summer in Mexico. After his death, Janet stayed on, studied ceramics and became a professional. She was killed in an airplane crash.

Lindsay and Carmen Decker- Lindsay taught sculpture. Had a bit of trouble with him. He was jealous of Carmen and thought that George had made a pass at her. So he tried to come on to me. He eventually left to follow the NY scene, had a show at one of the galleries, then we heard he had gotten into drugs. That’s the last we knew.

John and Jan DeMartelli – A wonderful, generous older couple. John had been a student of Thomas Hart Benton. Jan was killed in an auto accident after we had left for NY.

Mac and Kate McConnell- Another wonderful couple. They lived in a rehabbed old chicken coop and had a sort of farm with about fifty acres, a horse, a cow, a goat, not to mention cats and a dog. That’s how we got our first “mama cat”, the first of a long line of silver tabbies. Selma was paying us a visit and we went out there one day. Mac let her ride his horse, which turned into a minor disaster. Selma didn’t know the territory, but the horse did. He stopped short and she went flying. She was lucky to get away with only a broken finger.

Alma Goetch and Katherine Winkler- They were older women who lived together in a Frank Lloyd Wright house built in the forties. It was in a beautiful woodland setting on a back road. Mr. Wright’s furniture was very uncomfortable, and they never used it except when Mr. Wright was coming around for his periodic inspections.

George's beginnings as a teacher were a bit difficult. He had to learn that the students in the freshman classes he was given had no art background of any consequence. One day he noticed that a girl was having difficulty with a water color assignment. So he sat down and said, "now let's see what the problem is. Where's your water?" and the girl said, "Water?". One of the boys confessed that he had never seen a Jew, and that he expected to see horns on George's head. Some of the girls were intimidated, and one of them cried. The next semester George was taken off freshman classes.

My parents came to see us after Andy was born. So did George's folks at another time. We managed to survive the visits. When Andy was six months old I flew with him to Miami Beach, where my parents were living, to see my mother after her gall bladder operation. I met Barbara's new husband Artie. Barbara was already pregnant with Mark.

When our two years were up, we had to find a new place to live. We very confidently bought a house in Okemos because George had what seemed like a permanent appointment in the art department- no more audio-visual assignment. Then Jamie was born. With each baby, George was given a raise. Nineteen months after Jamie came Dan. Our new house was two stories high, and there I was carrying two babies up and down the stairs.

George had a studio at the college. He was experimenting with different ways of painting, mostly abstract, using materials applied to the canvas, like beads and aluminum foil. Then, for some reason, he started painting rabbis and sold them through a gallery in Detroit. Once we went to the Art Institute and saw the Diego Rivera murals.

A friend from NY, Larry Bernstein came to teach at the college. He and his wife Jackie became close friends. Jackie was pregnant, but miscarried. Years later, after Larry left for Southern Illinois College, they had two sons. A long time after that, when we were living in New Paltz, they came for a farewell visit. Jackie was dying of a brain tumor.

We also made friends with a graduate student, Harry Kiyooka, who came from Alberta, Canada. He and George were about the same age and were simpatico.

Art Darvishian was also a grad student. I became very close to his wife Shirley. They had two children the same age as ours. They were having a hard time economically and in other ways. Eventually they divorced. Shirley found someone else, and Art left. It was quite a coincidence that we ran into him years later in Buffalo while visiting Roland and Jo. He was teaching at Buffalo State in the art department. He had changed from a very handsome young man to someone who was overweight and ordinary looking. Astonishing! He died a few years after, too young.

George seemed to have inherited his grandfather's carpentry skills as well as his old wooden tools. His mentor at the art department workshop helped him with his ambition to add to our house. He started off with a small front entrance, then a carport, and then a two-story wing, which gave us a playroom downstairs and a large studio for him upstairs. The college had a lumber yard where it was possible to pick up building materials cheaply. We downsized our large bedroom and made a small studio for me. I had previously been using the basement to paint in, sometimes having to wear boots when the rains overcame the sump pump. The financing came from magazine illustrations that he was hired to do from a former grad student, Walt Chaffee. Also he was able to get one or two mural commissions from department stores. He was away for ten days on one job. But the money never stretched enough to buy much furniture. One day he drove to Detroit following a classified ad by a woman who was selling Navaho rugs. He picked one out for fifty dollars and we kept that rug until, after many years, we finally wore a hole in it. When we were packing up to leave New Paltz in 2004, the agent who sold our house for us, bought it for that same fifty dollars.

During the time of all that building construction, we had visits from family, usually in the summertime. My father tried to help, but didn't like to measure. After they left George had to undo his work. Artie also helped out, more successfully. Steve, at the age of fifteen, came to stay with us for awhile. That trip was a big adventure for him.

The people who sold us out property were a farm family. The farmer's land extended on one side and behind us. He was generous

enough to come in with his plow and dig up a garden for me. So a city girl started learning how to grow things. The vegetable garden was not too bad. Flowers I couldn't handle. One of the things I had a success with was cantaloupe. I remember when my aunt Fern was visiting, she was convinced I had bought it in the store.

We had fruit trees as well, a pear, sour cherry, and two apple trees. When the apples were ready, we decided to take them to the mill so we could make apple cider. At the back of our property there was an old root cellar. So we bought a barrel and got the cider. George put the barrel in the root cellar. He knew he had to attach the hose to let the gases out, but put it off till the next day. When he opened the door, he found that the barrel had exploded. Lesson learned.

With three little boys, I didn't have enough to do. So I discovered canning. That was fun. Soon the shelves in the basement were lined with mostly fruit. The best thing was making kosher dill pickles. That was a tradition I carried forward for many years. I also did a lot of sewing, making clothes for the boys. It was somewhat necessary. Money was tight.

The weather was sometimes scary, lots of tornado warnings. Andy would get upset when the storm clouds came, rushing into the house, yelling "danger!". We had converted our heating system from coal to natural gas. The former coal cellar was underground, next to the basement. It was the perfect storm shelter, but we never needed it.

So we spent seven years in Michigan, not adapting to it, missing the NY art scene. When George had the opportunity to get the job in New Paltz, we sold the home and left with no regrets.