

Down By The Berry Patch

"Woods at Michriste"

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As I have often claimed, "Life is made up of memories — God's very special gift to us". And, by far, some of the greatest memories of my life have been created in our woods at Michriste Manor.



What is Michriste Manor, where is it located, how did it get that name, and why are the woods so important to me? To me, it is just one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is beautiful because of its physical qualities, but the true beauty comes in the memories it has created over the past thirty five years. It is an 80 acre piece of land located at the dead end of Oyster Road (off of Beechwood) that was purchased in 1970 from Howard Miller. At that time, it was "just a large piece of land" with a 20 acre portion that had obviously been used to graze cattle because every swamp hole was surrounded by barbed wire that had to be removed. There was also the base of an old barn structure. It was a piece of land that was to become a weekend hideaway, our summer home, and our retirement living area.

However, it was the 60 acre portion of woods that first attracted us to the property. Because the road was blocked with snow, we entered the property and woods on a snowmobile with the realtor apologizing for the wintery conditions. We rode into the woods and it was absolutely "love at first sight" as we saw the water created by a beaver dam, the beautiful snow covered trees with evergreens wearing their white jackets of snow, the wonderful towering white birch, the wonderful hardwoods, the majesty of the huge white pines, and the beautiful blue sky overhead. And, today — June 12, 2005, on the eleventh anniversary of the death of our dear son, Christopher, I am taking time to draw from my heart and put into words just what the woods at Michriste mean to me.

But one other thing that needs an explanation is the name, Michriste Manor. We pondered over a name and decided that for our majestic manor, we needed something special. And the most special thing in our lives was our three sons — Michael (Mich), Christopher (Chris) and Steven (Ste). We combined the first portion of each of their names and arrived at our beloved Michriste Manor. That is the name that is carved in the wooden sign that now identifies our place to family and friends, neighbors and guests.

Today, I climbed out of bed, stretched, looked out the window and recited my daily Mantra: "Today is the day that the Lord hath made; let me be glad and rejoice in it." I like living and my current bout with cancer brings a whole new, in depth, meaning to those words. I marvel and thank the Lord for all he has given me during my seventy one year journey on this precious earth. Today, I decided to draw on a

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portion from a previous writing titled 360 Degrees of Memories — a portion that relates to my woods, a place that has impacted my life in such a positive way.

I am now propped up in my bed with my trusty Macintosh PowerBook G3 computer in my lap. My diagnosis and treatments for cancer will be tucked in the back of my mind as I focus on the memories of my beautiful woods at Michriste Manor.

The entrance to the three miles of “Trails in the Woods” is an inviting sight — trails that were put in by the boys and Lorain with the help of Fritz Ehinger's bulldozer. The nieces and nephews would say they remember weed stomping to help with the trails — actually they were helping by stomping on the bracken covered trails to make them more visible. Three miles was a perfect practice field for Steve and Mike who ran cross country in high school. Now the trails get groomed regularly. And it is a path that has been traveled often and by many.

Just what are some of the things we pass as we meander along these trails? What do we pass? What do we see? What memories are created? Let me list some of them:

1. The beaver dam, a place where many nights Steve and Christopher camped out and used the skills learned at outdoor Camp Nebagamom in Wisconsin. The beaver pond there is where two boats (a canoe belonging to our 80 year old friend, Mary Mae Campbell, that she used for bass fishing and one that we borrowed from Downings for fishing) were smashed when beavers felled trees on them. It is a place where we sat for hours watching the beavers flap their tails on the water to try to scare us away.
2. Mike's Lookout Point that he thinks is the most beautiful place on the 80 acres, a place he always said he would like to build a home some day. This overlooks the beaver pond, has the trail running close by where it veers to the east through the beautiful hard woods.
3. The hills where we tobogganed and sledged where I broke my back when the saucer I was on went airborne and hit a tree — with many family members present to see what happened.
4. Chapel Hill where a priest friend said masses for wild flower bearing neighbors and the last time Bruce was here he did the readings. As we entered the woods, the line of neighbors and family would sing old fashion hymns. Brother, Bruce, did his last reading just a few days before his heart by-pass surgery that was unsuccessful and he died in a hospital in Lansing. But the memory of the reading will always be with me.
5. The spot where Lorain put up Mother's screen house so I could write my doctoral dissertation (Western Michigan University with a degree in Educational Leadership) in the woods near my Chad's Pond (Waldon's Pond) with a very lengthy cable running from the house so I could use my computer. And when I needed a time to relax from the stress of the dissertation, I would walk the trails and relax in God's special creation.

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6. The Maiden Hair Fern Patch that caused a big jog in the trail because I did not want them to disturb the ferns,
7. The Upper Trail through the hardwoods of maple and oak with very little ground cover because the sun could not shine through the densely leafed trees.
8. The Huck Finn Swamp that runs east and west and is a challenge to cross but took up hours and days of the time of our sons as they navigated through it ,
9. The Lady Slipper Patch across the dam where we had many a wet foot as we worked our way across the dam to see the beautiful pink and yellow flowers,
9. The Jackson Trail that veers off to Jackson's property (even though the property sold to new owners after the Jackson's died many years ago),
10. The tree and ground hunting blinds that are used annually by Lorain, Mike, and a few close family and friends. The stories around the table as the guys get together to tell their stories and recall the count of deer they saw while sitting in their blinds are a joy to recall. They would meet at the house at a given time to have coffee, hot chocolate, and coffee cakes before returning to the woods — and this goes on year after year after year. Lorain's brother, Richard, from North Carolina is a good memory because he often chose November for his annual trip to Michigan — so he could come to our Michriste. Along with this was the annual time to tack up the downed old barb wire fence around the property, especially along the north end — and view the No Hunting signs put up by the neighbors so no one crossed onto their property.
11. Trails used for Cross County Skiing, Snow Shoeing, and a little Snowmobiling by family and friends.
12. Memories of groups that used the woods with us — the staff from Bay Arenac Intermediate School District where I worked, Cramer Junior High School in Essexville where Lorain worked — well over 75 people who still talk about the escapades when we get together with them.
13. Garden Club groups who want to see our flowers in the woods, the moss growing on the trees, the Maiden Hair fern patch, and the special Fern Patch area with over seven kinds of fern.
14. The winter picnics in the woods when we would spend all day out there with friends- -a big fire for preparing our hot dogs and some- mores. We always had oranges and apples, cans of pork and beans, and some chips. We would walk the trails, ice skate on the beaver pond, and marvel at the warmth of the sun when the temperatures were indicating that it was cold outside.

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15. The trails are used for horse back riding — a chance to move slowly through the woods at a different perspective. Mike, Janice, Alex and their friends use them often and return with new tales of new sights discovered.
16. The tales that we recall from having the woods lumbered out are great memories. The McKellers were true artists of their trade as they worked on the woods and educated us to the types of trees and the making of a healthy woods. Mike even prepared a term paper on lumbering and gave a presentation to his class that included a slide presentation of the lumbering activity. We lumbered to the fence borders on our property to the north, east and west. The neighbors in the north lumbered up to the fence line that we recognized for our lumbering and theirs.
17. Biologist friends walked us through the woods and explained the ways of the animals that chewed off the branches of the oak trees to bring down acorns to hide away for the winter.
18. The fox dens are always fascinating and lead us back to books and the internet to learn more about their habitat.
19. The bear tracks discovered by son, Mike, over the wooden bridge constructed over a wet spot will always be a great memory. That Thanksgiving Day, many family members walked through the woods to view the prints and create a memory that has been a discussion over these many years.
20. Riding our dune buggy and 4 wheeler through the woods will be remembered by 4 many, many folks.
21. And our latest acquisition is a golf cart so I am now able to go through the woods. With the cancer, none of the previous means (snow shoes, ski doo, cross country skis, 4-wheeler, dune buggy, horse back riding or even walking) are things that can get me into my beloved woods. The solution is the used golf cart. God has a way of answering prayers.
22. Neighbors, family and friends picking mushrooms in the spring.
23. Korean friends picking the fern and bracken tops before they leafed out to prepare as a vegetable that reminded me of asparagus.
24. Mary Mae and Lisle Campbell walking with me and teaching me the names of so many wild flowers — so many that I would not have even seen if they had not pointed them out to me. They died the past couple years at ages 96 and 100. Oh, how much they taught me over the years, as did their daughter and son-in-law, Tom and Marilyn Reed. These folks all lived in Ohio, but spent many summers and weekends in Michigan at their 40 acres at the end of Oyster Road.

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25. My two favorite photos of Mike are when he was age eight, sitting on his swinging branch in the woods with the sunshine backlighting the photo. My camera and my dark room processing captured a memory of the innocence and beauty of youth. The other is a photo of the back of Mike walking into the woods when he was about 14. He is wearing his usual camouflage and blends in the the woods. But I always say, "The way I will remember Mike is walking into the woods — his first and truest love." At age 40, that still holds true.
26. I remember seeing grandson, Alex, coming from the woods carrying a home made bow and arrow and a home made fishing pole. I have always claimed that since Alex was age five, he could survive on his own in the woods.
27. The class trips of Alex and his Scout Troops walked in the woods, learned and practiced survival skills, and hopefully created lessons and memories that will stay with them for life.
28. Good friend, Bruce Maugham, now living in California, and cousins, Dick and Frank Cederwall, would not miss a year without coming to Michriste for their annual walk in the woods — just to see what changed and what remained the same. The trails mean so much to them and their return from the woods means a chance to sit with them and hear their stories — new plants, new trees, new animals, or new sounds they have discovered.
29. The sounds in the woods are the leaves blowing in the wind, birds singing, creatures chirping and croaking, deer snorting when we invade their private territory, turkey running through the leaves, water flowing over the small dam, and grouse whirling into the air as they ready for take off. If you stop and listen, the woods are never truly quiet.
30. The special Creek Trail created from the run off water of the five ponds on Michriste Manor is a sight to behold. The steps to the trails were structured from old rail road ties and created by son, Steve. The water fall was created with dozens of bags of 5 concrete and topped with field stone and pudding stones from the fields on Michriste and slate. The slate was from a broken blackboard from an old 1903 school house in Unionville where both Judy and Lorain attended and later returned to as teachers. When the building was demolished, we asked for a blackboard that was later broken — but the pieces were saved and bring memories each time we walk past the dam. The little benches along the trail offer a place to sit and relax before crossing the creek over a wooden bridge and entering the Fern Patch.
31. When I was doing some work as a professional portrait photographer, many friends would have me take family and graduation photos in the woods — the perfect backdrop.

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32. When the trails are cleaned in the spring, there are always piles of stacked wood that Mike will use for heating his home during the long winter months. Mike and Alex will haul it home during their trips in the woods.
33. The first weekend in August is Cousin's Weekend at Michriste, with family coming from all over Michigan and various places across the country. We started this so the young family members, our nieces and nephews and now their children, would learn the importance of remaining close to family. But a part of the weekend is learning the true appreciation of the out of doors as the kids have built forts in the woods and come back each year to see what is still standing and what needs to be added. They walk and run the trails, learn about the out of doors, and create memories. I am amazed at the letters, note and cards I have received from these kids during the past few months that contain thanks and memory stories of their time at Michriste Manor — but especially of the time in the woods. Most of the families put up tents for the weekend. It is a true outdoor experience.
34. For nine years, we have held the Annual Prince of Peace Church Picnic at Michriste and many of the 75 to 100 guests walk the trails in the woods, swim in the ponds, and enjoy good friendship and conversation.
35. In August of 2003, we held a 50th Anniversary Party on our property that was attended by 160 guests. Only four of these people had not been to Michriste Manor on previous occasions. We did not have to include maps. The purpose of the day was to thank these family members and friends for touching our lives. The plan was to hold the faith service in the woods, but because of the humidity and bugs (and advanced age of many guests) we decided to hold that part of the day in a different location. But many guests did walk in the woods — especially along the creek. And many reminisced about prior trips in the woods that were the beautiful background for the days activities.
36. In 1986, our son and daughter-in law were married at Michriste Manor with a couple hundred guests in attendance. The property and woods were enjoyed by many.
37. In 1983, Mike graduated from Essexville Hampton Schools and did not want a graduation party until we agreed to have it at Michriste. It turned into a whole weekend party with folks camping here and enjoying the grounds and the woods — Mike's way of life.
38. Our retirement parties were held at Michriste Manor in 1990 and 1992 with 6 hundreds of guests. Oh, what memories of folks attending in casual garb and comfortable walking shoes so they could enjoy good conversation, good food, and a walk the trails in the woods!

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39. In 1994, our son, Christopher, died and over 100 guests of the funeral came back to our home to see how Christopher spent his life up north. Since Christopher was young (35), many of the guests were young friends who did not understand death. They walked the trails and had us relate stories about Christopher — what he did with his time up north. We pointed out the place where Christopher camped out with his brother next to the beaver pond, where he sat and wrote of his views of the woods. We showed them his gardens that he planted with experimental techniques — and of his plans to return to Guatemala to help the poor people with improved gardening techniques.
40. Then there was the area in the woods where we tried to create Michriste Park (just for our family and friends) and it just did not work out. We had picnic tables, a campfire burning pit area and it was a wonderful idea. But I wanted to have hosta plants and things that were not native to the woods. We had a lot of money into plants and the deer kept eating them. I learned so much about a woods in our early years at Michriste, and I continue to learn daily.
41. One of the most interesting birds of the woods is the Pileated Woodpecker — huge, shy, and very loud. The size of the wood chips is beyond belief. One year, Christopher and Steve helped Mike take a a log from the woods that had been worked on by a pileated woodpecker. It was during the winter months and the log was taken to Mike's classroom just before Christmas vacation. When they returned to school, there were bugs all over the classroom and the teacher called to tell us remove the log immediately. The warmth of the building brought out the bugs. But we still have places in the woods where the woodpeckers have their nests, hatch their young, and continue to think our woods is a wonderful place for them to stay.
42. Our photo albums are filled with Michriste Woods memories. But a picture is only what you see. The memories it brings forward are the things we remember and talk about.

We purchased the 80 acres of land (Michriste Manor) two and a half miles north east of Rose City on Oyster Road off of Beechwood. We added houses, barns, ponds, artesian wells, orchards, trails, gardens, dreams, visions, lots of love, many memories, and more over the years. We have lumbered, bird watched, studied trees and ground cover, hunted, developed and walked trails, observed birds and animals, entertained friends, held faith services, and marveled at the woods. God added His ever changing artistic touch.

The trails were started by walking and packing down the bracken to create a path, the brush was then cut with a cycle, we mowed with a push mower, we mowed with a riding mower, later we widened the narrow trails to a road by hiring Fritz Ehinger and his bulldozer — a place where we could drive our pick up, we planted with seed, started to cut with a brush hog, and finally we perfected it to the point that we keep them mowed and groomed with a Ford tractor with a five foot cut. I mowed the trails for years calling it my therapy drive. What wonderful memories I have projected in just writing this piece!

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Some folks just have a woods. We consider our woods as an extension of our living quarters. The memories of the past 35 years at Michriste Manor are our true keepsakes. How could we ever put a price on them? The memories are the most valuable things we own — and they can never be taken from us. They can't be sold or given away; however they can be shared. We hope that in the future this sharing will continue to be appreciated by our family and friends. We will always feel wealthy because of these memories. We are blessed! God loves us!

Christopher, I write you a letter each year on the anniversary of your death. Does this writing bring back wonderful memories for you? You were so much a part of developing all of this. We love you dearly. You are missed every single day. God Bless, take care. Some day we will join you in heaven.

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