

Surveying 'Da Situation



By John D. Matonich, LS

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Beyond Stereotypes

Did you ever notice how wrong most stereotypes are? I don't particularly care for them in the first place, but they seem to be quite prevalent these days. Some of them near and dear to my heart are the geographic stereotypes that exist in Michigan and other states. Living in the Flint area, I know all too well how bad national exposure can taint feelings. I am fortunate to get to travel at times and truly enjoy being able to meet different folks around the country. Typically when they ask where I live and I mention the Flint, Michigan area, I get the "I'm terribly sorry" look along with the sympathetic tilt of the head. I can explain our area's benefits until I'm blue in the face, but I still think they want to reach out and pat my hand in sympathy. You would think with this type of treatment that people in the Flint area would be more conscious of stereotyping other areas of the country, but it's not the case.

Recently, I was asked to make a presentation to a state organization's annual meeting. I've always appreciated these types of opportunities, as it gives me a chance to develop relationships with folks from other parts of the country. When I mentioned this to a few friends, I got the same "look" I've seen before. They didn't seem to envy my invitation to Fargo, North Dakota in February.

Now before you start nodding your head, too, let's examine the facts. The weather is of no consequence to me. Having grown up in the far west end of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (commonly referred to as "the U.P."), cold and snow are regular components of most weather forecasts there (even in the summer). Yes, I did see the movie *Fargo*, but didn't



laugh much during the movie *Escanaba in Da Moonlight* either. I guess my roots explain that as well. I also happen to know several good North Dakota natives and have never once heard them say, "Aww, jeeese, Marge!" Even armed with the distinct realities, these folks from Flint who typically cringe at the mention of any movie with "Roger" in the title actually had me second guessing my own convictions.

To make matters worse, on the plane to Fargo I found myself sitting next to a Fargo resident. She really wasn't any better as she spent a good part of the flight telling me all the reasons she really didn't want to be heading back to her home. I was finally able to get her to tell me some of the attributes of that part of the state and found them to be very interesting. The metropolitan area surrounding Fargo has a population approaching 125,000 people. There are a number of educational institutions in the area and several major employers. She admitted her own business had all the work it could handle and the property values for residential housing were exploding. Quite a far cry from a mental

picture of a barren wasteland with 40 mph winds and six-foot snow drifts.

After I landed, I continued to see why the area was doing well. The people I had the opportunity to meet were tremendous hosts and great folks. I got to spend a fair amount of time with them and never once felt like an outsider. In fact, when I called my wife the next day to let her know I arrived in one piece, she asked how I liked being there. I answered it was just like being home. Since she travels back to the U.P. with me quite regularly, she knew what I meant.

The bottom line is no matter where you are or where you're from, you should find the good things about the area to focus on. Believe me, if people live there, you can bank on some good things happening around you. Attitude is the key and it is definitely infectious whether positive or negative. For me, I'd rather have it be positive. Even the good folks in my native Upper Peninsula keep the faith. Just remember, "Say Ya to Da U.P., eh!"

And that's the situation as I survey it... *A*