

PLACE

BULLY FOR NEW BUFFALO

Smallness in a town – and in oneself – is hard to outgrow.

By Natalie Angier

One afternoon I found myself sitting in the makeup room of a cable television station in Washington, D.C., with half a dozen other women, preparing for a panel discussion on some grand meringue of a theme like the Future of American Women. As we waited to have our faces buffed, the conversation turned to our pasts. One of the women, an actress, asked me where I'd gone to high school. Shrinking ever so slightly into my chair, I muttered, "New Buffalo, Michigan."

Rather than say, "New Buffalo? You mean the old one wasn't bad enough?"—a response I was accustomed to eliciting in the decades since I'd left the place—she replied brightly, "Oh, a friend of mine has a vacation house in New Buffalo. And Oprah Winfrey bought property around there, too."

Obviously, the newfound hipness of New Buffalo, of which I'd heard rumors, had reached pandemic proportions. When I lived there, in the 1970s, New Buffalo was a two-bit, single-sneeze blue-collar town; achoo and you missed it. But a developer had built one of the world's largest private marinas—right where I'd had my first taste of Boone's Farm apple wine—and the town had started luring in the resort crowd and the yacht-endowed. Now it was being called the Soho or Sag Harbor of the Midwest.

"Have you been back there lately?" another woman at the table asked me. "Do you still have family there?"

"No, my family left when I did. I haven't gone anywhere near New Buffalo in 25 years."

"You should check it out," the actress said. "It's quite a scene."

What could New Buffalo possibly look like as a millionaire's playpen? What sort of cute shoppes, treateries, or browseriums could have replaced such fixtures on the main drag as the lumber store, the pinball hall, or Jenny's hot dog stand? Did anybody still "cat the drag"—drive a car up and down, back and forth along the short stretch of tarway that counted as downtown, in a desultory, desperate quest for something to do, parties to crash, people to harass?

So two years later I finally screwed up my courage and took my husband and daughter to the place I'd sought so hard and hopelessly to forget. I wanted to see through my own woes-colored contact lenses how much New Buffalo had changed. Beyond taking stock of external changes, I was ready for an overhaul of what I can only call my inner New Buffalo. The past can be such a bully, and bullies should never be flattered with displays of fear. Why was I so afraid of the geographical coordinates thumbprinted onto Lake Michigan 60 miles east of Chicago, just past the Indiana state line, an innocent municipality with a faintly preposterous name? After all, I lived in New Buffalo for only four years, and I'd liked a lot of the people there. Why, then, did the simple mention of New Buffalo make me feel gloomy, claustrophobic, practically prenatal? How does a town come to take on the role of a character in one's life, a blood relative—a presence you yearn for and flail against, that defines you and that you blame for the crime of being itself? I was tired of resenting New Buffalo in all its renditions—old New Buffalo, nouvelle New Buffalo, the cat dragger, the trendsetter. I wanted to kiss and make up with the place. Or at least nod politely from across the room.

THE TOWN OF NEW BUFFALO was founded in 1836 by Wessel Whittaker, an ambitious skipper and lumberman from, yes, Buffalo. Whittaker dreamed of turning his town into the major port on Lake Michigan, but Chicago won that little championship, and Whittaker died broke. Apart from a brief boom wrought by the arrival of the railroad in 1849, New Buffalo remained a backwater, its population never rising above the low four digits. People worked in the local stores and gas stations, on the railroad, or at the steel mills in larger towns nearby.

I, too, arrived by rail, aboard Natalie's Red-eye Special. My parents had just split up, and my mother hauled my younger brother and me by train from the Bronx to New Buffalo, where she had friends she wanted to join—including a much-younger boyfriend. I wept nonstop for the entire 18-hour trip.

It wasn't that I minded my parents' divorce; frankly, I was sick of their ugly fights. But I absolutely didn't want to move to New Buffalo. I was a born New Yorker with Creston Avenue street creds. My favorite color was black, my favorite flower the bagel. I'd visited New Buffalo the previous summer. I knew what it was like. New Buffalo was Archie comic books, and I wouldn't look good in pompoms.

"Please let me stay with you!" I begged my father.

"Children belong with their mother," he snarled, his tone underscoring his point.

A few weeks after that, I was sitting in the auditorium of New Buffalo High School at my very first pep rally, watching three sprightly Bettys and one plump Veronica wave pompoms in the air. They were cheering on the New Buffalo Bisons, though I had no idea yet whether the team played basketball, football, or croquet.

Oh, small-town life had its perks, especially at first. To my new classmates, I was like an exotic pigeon who'd flapped in from the biggest, baddest, most Marlon Brando of all cities. The boys vied to ask me to go steady, and the girls invited me to their pajama parties for help in deconstructing risqué rock lyrics about transvestites, say, or certain leather accessories.

There were also the perks of nature. I loved riding my bicycle on country lanes, past fields of cows, corn, sheep, and quaint signage about the fate of trespassers. Once, I found a wounded bird in the middle of the road. I took it home to nurse it back to health, and when it recovered enough to fly off to freedom again, I felt exalted, literary, Heidi for a day.

And then there was Lake Michigan, with its vast blue breast and fat beige beaches, and the lapping waves that almost passed for speech, and the sunsets smearing their Maybelline colors across the sky each evening, and the noonday sun in summer burning my skin so neatly I could entertain friends and family by peeling it off in purse-sized sheets. The lake was so big it fooled you into thinking you were elsewhere: east coast, west coast, anywhere but...there.

But I was there, in a very small town, and it soon began to chafe. I'd always loved built beauties, but to me New Buffalo was the architectural equivalent of Hamburger Helper—slapped together, functional, inoffensive, unidentifiable. Even some of the oldest buildings in town, boxy gabled "folk-style" houses dating from the 19th century, had a lackluster, nonspecific quality to them, as though they were waiting for Oz to grant them color, career, a certificate of authenticity. Who cared about streetscapes? Nobody walked anywhere. They drove. They drove drunk, they drove stoned, they drove across railroad tracks after the barriers had been lowered. Some of my classmates were killed in car accidents. People heard I was from New York and they'd talk about the dangers of crime. I'd say, Oh yeah? Nothing is as deadly as driving a car.

New Buffalo High School was also dangerously strapped for cash. The same instructor might teach chemistry, biology, social studies, and phys ed before starting his real duties as coach for the perpetually buffaloed Bisons. I didn't want to go to games. I didn't want to drive a car. New Buffalo and I were fast becoming incompatible. I'd gone from being a novelty to being, in one classmate's evocative phrase, a "complete weirdo," and I wanted a whole body transplant out of there.

After I graduated and went off to the University of Michigan on a scholarship, my mother and younger brother moved back to New York City. Then, when I was still only 19, my father died of melanoma. I began to think of New Buffalo not only as the place that I'd barely escaped from, but also as a dark force that had snatched me away from my father and kept me from knowing him for the last few years of his life.

I MIGHT HAVE STAYED stuck in that rage if not for an invitation from my old high school chum, Marcia, who last August asked us to join her and her family at her parents' beachfront house in New Buffalo. My daughter adores Marcia's children, and she loves the beach. So I went. I saw. I may not have conquered, but at least I didn't fall.

The New Buffalo I encountered had a stranger's face on a déjà vu figure. Where before there had been a scruffy algae-scrimmed lagoon at the mouth of Lake Michigan, now there was a

large marina, with spiffy cordoned docks and rows of sleek white yachts bobbing like carousel stallions. The marina had drawn in wealthy summering crowds from Chicago and environs, who no doubt were reassured by the local business bureau's decision to rename the area "Harbor Country." Expensive condominiums clad in nautically appropriate gray wood siding jutted over the south end of the marina, with only the upper-floor units still to be sold to those hardy pioneers willing to climb three stories during their vacations.

My husband Rick and I walked along the main drag and stopped in at Casey's Bar and Grill, formerly the Ethel Merman of town dives, now an amber-lit, bronze-trimmed ristorante. I tried, unsuccessfully, to buy one of the wall posters depicting a Casey's of some parallel universe peopled by elegant, art-moderne clientele one might have seen in a Paris café in the 1920s or '30s. Back out on the boulevard, we saw shops that sold the standard seaside assortment of soaps, cremes, jewelry, tiny *mise en scènes* with buoys and gulls, and clothes far too expensive for the few people I knew who had stayed in New Buffalo from the old days. I was grateful to find a decent cup of café au lait, an impressively stocked wine shop, and a large outdoor produce market—amenities that didn't exist during my internment—but still, I had the strange sensation of desensitization, of being somewhere that just happened to be there. And as we wandered aimlessly up and down, back and forth along Whittaker Avenue, I realized, with a shock, that I was doing the pedestrian version of catting the drag.

The next day, we rode our bikes to see the famed new mansions along Lakeshore Drive. The structures seemed to sprawl octopoidally in all directions, rifling through eras, cultures, styles, your kids' toy box. There were haciendas, palazzos, and Tudor manors; a four-winged, five-gabled stone castle with stepped landscaping and multiple fountains; a baffling, bumptious cerulean saltbox that even my seven-year-old decried as too big and too blue. Nothing we saw looked comfortable with itself or resonant with the region. This was not a homegrown reclamation of lost glory, a loving restoration along the lines of Cape May. There had been very little historic grandeur to restore, but plenty of forested lots to clear away and build on, and bulging sacks of money from Chicago with which to pluck up lakeside property. Too bad nobody brought Chicago's architectural genius to bear on the frenzied development.

And too bad that most full-time New Buffalo residents appear to have hardly benefited from their town's new renown. Nearly all the good factory jobs have long since vanished from the region, and busing tables at a resort just isn't quite the same. As a result of the poor employment picture, the year-round New Buffalo head count is lower today than when I was in town. My old high school has been turned into pricey condominiums, and local students attend a bigger school down the road, together with students from other districts.

The beauties that I saw in New Buffalo were the beauties I remembered—of nature. I walked along the rural road where I'd found my wounded bird, miles from downtown, and the scene was so wholly unaltered that I couldn't help scanning the road for another creature in need. Lake Michigan is, if anything, more beautiful than before, its waters cleaner and its beaches wider and whiter, very likely the result of a decline in local industry. My daughter Katherine walked along the shore as my mother used to do, bending over in search of crinoids, fossils of sea lilies and feather stars that lived millions of years ago. And whenever she found one of the small, stony gems, she cried out with joy.

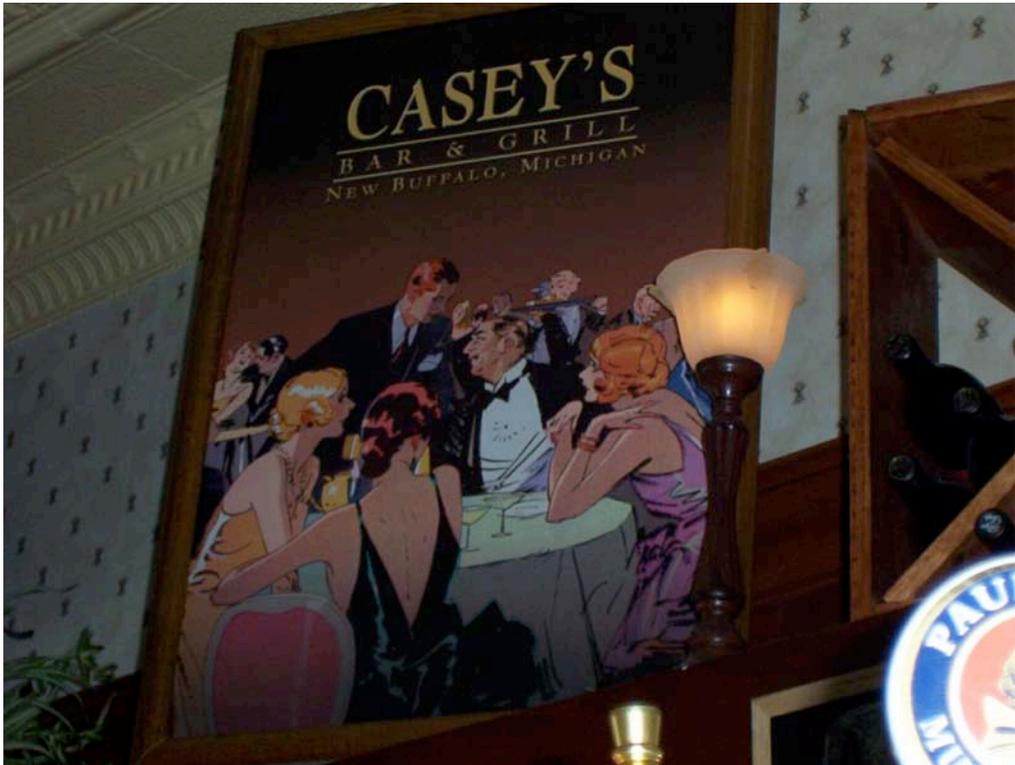
Katherine, at least, fell in love with New Buffalo, and—who knows?—I may take her back there again for the sand, sun, and fossils. The town is still searching for gravitas, a stable economy, a decent fashion consultant. And I still don't like it, but maybe that's just as well. Otherwise I might feel pity—for the town, and myself, and the smallness we both can't seem to outgrow.



Natalie at her old high school, now condominiums



Marcia in front of a New Buffalo McPalazzo



Casey's Alternate Universe



Katherine at Lake Michigan, finding fun, sun and fossils