



■ The 9/11 Memorial Corner

Meet the Flintstones

How to give away a home in Vehicle City, Michigan, one of the most violent places in the world

by Edward McClelland

The 9/11 Memorial Corner occupies three of the four lots at the intersection of North and McClellan Streets, on the vanishing North End of Flint. A cross between folk art and patriotic kitsch, its backdrop is a pentaptych of the Manhattan skyline, with the Twin Towers still the tallest stalks in that architectural garden. A ceramic angel spreads her plaster wings atop the middle panel, while in the grass — more tightly barbered here than in any of the sur-

rounding yards — is a statuette of the Virgin Mary bowing her head. Written on a billboard are the names of every police officer and firefighter who died that Tuesday morning. A winding path of cinder blocks bears a hand-painted roll call of all the soldiers who never came home from Afghanistan. “Our (heart) and (praying hands) go out to the world. God bless 9-11-01 America,” reads the message on a concrete foundation, road-mapped with weeds.

I discovered the Corner six years ago, while searching for the remains of Buick City, a factory that once employed 28,000 autoworkers, but closed in 1999, leaving behind a neighborhood of shuttered taverns, party stores, stringy people sitting on slanted porches, and a Realtor’s sign planted on the front lawn of UAW Local 599 headquarters. There are 12,000 vacant residential lots in Flint, and the Corner occupies three of them. I wasn’t walking long among its roster of the dead

before a small, tattooed woman appeared on the porch of one of the block’s three remaining houses and walked across the street.

Suzie Fitch curated the site, checking the Internet every day for deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan, recording the sad news with a fine tipped brush. When an Army psychiatrist killed 13 military personnel at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009, Fitch filled an unused lot with wooden blocks bearing the names of each victim.

"We just lost two this weekend," she said. "We lost 47 in April."

"What about the soldiers in Iraq?" I asked.

"Iraq din't have nothin' to do with 9/11," she said. "I can't wait until the war is over. I wish we never gone into Iraq. We should finish Afghanistan first. We had to go there, no ifs, ands, or buts. They're the ones who killed us."

A pickup truck pulled up across the street. Fitch's husband, Moose, home from hanging drywall, joined us. Moose wore a ponytail, a gray-ing beard, and a T-shirt with the face of a similarly bearded man then still at large in the Middle East. "Wanted," it read. "Osama bin Laden."

Before the Fitches built their memorial, "the neighborhood was using that corner as a public dump site," Moose said. "We still find a lot of stuff down there. You get tired of looking at garbage because people just don't care. They don't take pride in their country that I saw as a child."

The couple had met in Chicago, her hometown, then returned to Flint, his hometown, because he needed to be close to his children by an earlier marriage.

"When he brought me here, he's like, 'Wait 'til you see Flint,' she said. "'It's happening. It's goin' on. It's a mini Chicago.' And I come here and I'm like..."

"I was embarrassed," Moose confessed. "The whole time I was gone, it went to hell."

"We're gettin' out of here," Suzie said. Then she jumped in the air and stamped on the sidewalk. "I am not gonna die in Flint, Michi-kin!"

After that encounter, I stopped at the 9/11 Memorial Corner every time I was in Flint. I wrote about the Corner in my Rust Belt history, *Nothin' but Blue Skies: The Heyday, Hard Times, and Hopes of America's Industrial Heartland*, and continued visiting after the book came out, because I considered Moose and Suzie friends, and because the Corner is my favorite Flint tourist attraction. I'm not the only one. On

Memorial Day 2011, I attended a candlelight vigil. The bikers arrived first, a gray-haired iron cavalry called the Christian Motorcyclists Association of America. Their "Riding for the Son" vests were embroidered with Indian arrowheads — Flint's civic emblem — identifying them as the Flint Area Good News

three dozen — a good crowd for an outdoor vesper, which is what the ceremony in the long, late spring Michigan evening felt like — Moose made a speech.

"Will all the veterans stand up? We're here to honor the fallen veterans, the veterans still fighting, and the families. We need to start

Photo by Edward McClelland



■ Suzie Fitch and part of the 9/11 Memorial Corner.

Riders.

Moose, who is patriotic without being political, wore a T-shirt that read, "I support my country and our troops. Prayer for the prisoners and missing." He had strung fleece Marine Corps blankets along a wire, lit candles inside glowing cutaway milk jugs, set up a video camera on a tripod, and was now walking along the improvised plank benches and folding chairs, recruiting veterans to fold the flag. (Moose had never served in the military himself, which may be why he admired veterans so.)

When the audience numbered

supporting our veterans because they give us the freedom to do this."

Even in late May, Michigan sunlight doesn't last forever. It melts and dissolves. As the infiltrating darkness grayed the evening beyond the balance point between day and night, Suzie laid lilies at a wooden cutout of a soldier's silhouette, then read a poem clipped from a newspaper. ("Memorial Day is a day of tears/ For those who died over the years.") Finally, she led the congregation across the street to her memorial and asked everyone to recite, in unison, a name she'd

painted atop a cinder block. In the vigil's final act, the names of three dozen dead soldiers, sailors, and airmen overlapped each other.

The 9/11 Memorial Corner could not exist anywhere but a city like Flint. Where else could the Fitches have acquired as much vacant land for their patriotic crèche? As the houses surrounding Buick City emptied out, the Fitches bought vacant lots from the Genesee County Land Bank, which sold them for as little as \$25 to neighbors willing to cut the grass.

The couple had expanded their yard nearly to the end of the block. The only corner they didn't own was squatted on by a dead-eyed house that had become a dumping ground for old mattresses; it remained upright only because the city couldn't afford to bulldoze it. The Fitches didn't own the land across the street, but Moose mowed the lawns anyway, so drug dealers couldn't hide their stashes in the weeds. One hundred years after GM's founding, Flint is at the far end of its historic arc. The Vehicle City had been built to produce automobiles, but once the plants wore out, it is being disassembled at the same geometric rate at which it had risen. In the damp, lush climate of Lower Michigan, verdure is relentless, crawling through every sidewalk fault, packing every empty space with thick grass. Red clover, teasel, yarrow, and toadflax have forced themselves through the concrete slabs that once supported Buick City and Chevy in the Hole, two demolished auto plants. Trees encroach on the yards Moose tries to keep clear — trees broad enough for drugs dealers to hide themselves behind. Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass" seems appropriate for the Memorial Corner, since it's about war dead. "Two years, 10 years, and passengers ask the conductor:/ what place is this?/ where are we now/ I am the grass./ Let me work." But it's also appropriate for Flint itself, disappearing under



vegetation.

Moose is 57 years old. Hanging drywall has left him with bone spurs on his spine, arthritis in his joints. Allergic to pain medication, he has no choice but to endure the aches that are his trade's only pension. Last winter, the Michigan cold caused him "a massive amount of pain." So much pain that he decided to leave Flint for Roswell, New Mexico, where he knows a Mormon missionary who visited the corner while evangelizing in the Vehicle City years ago.

"A lot of people say warm weather will help me," Moose said. "I'll be young enough to start a new life. I'm going to try to do something where I don't have so much lifting."

Moose figured he needed \$3,500 to

everyone wants a house on two acres in the suburbs, or a loft in the Durant, downtown Flint's faded glory hotel, recently converted to luxury apartments. Moose's house is a midsized dwelling for a middle-class city, which Flint hasn't been since the early 1980s, when General Motors began withdrawing from its hometown. In 1980, when a young man could still walk out of high school and into an auto plant, Flint had the highest median income for workers under 35 in the nation. Since then, that figure has fallen 40 percent, more than any other city.

The house would have fetched \$25,000, Moose figured. But if he sold it, would the new buyer look after the 9/11 Corner? He couldn't make that a condition of the sale price. So Moose

that he could spare his Corner from the forces of decay that have overtaken the rest of the North End. As the saying goes, "Nature always bats last." Moose had been naïve before. Sincere and transparent, he projects those qualities onto everyone he meets.

In 2004, Moose appeared in Michael Moore's anti-Iraq War film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, after the filmmaker discovered the 9/11 Memorial Corner on a hometown visit. Unsophisticated Moose didn't know Moore from D.W. Griffith, but he'll show off his Corner to anyone, so he allowed the director to film them driving around the North End in Moose's pickup.

"They said they were taking pictures of memorials to 9/11, and the movie was going to be about honoring those folks of 9/11," Moose told me later. "He came up to my wife: 'This is the best thing we've seen in the city of Flint.'"

Once the movie came out, though, Moose felt he'd been a victim of journalistic trickery. This was Moose's quote, as it appeared in *Fahrenheit 9/11*: "Look at the neighborhood I live in. Most of 'em are abandoned. That's not right. You want to talk about terrorism? Come right here. President Bush, right here. He knows about this corner."

Moose's words give the impression that he was blaming gangbangers for terrorizing the North End. In fact, Moose said, Moore combined two unrelated quotes. The second half was a response to the question, "Who do you want to visit this corner?"

As a result of his *Fahrenheit 9/11* appearance, Moose was tracked down by another Flint documentarian: Kevin Leffler, producer of *Shooting Michael Moore*, a muckracking expose on America's No. 1 muckracking exposé.

In the film, Moose tearfully demanded to know how Moore could misrepresent his patriotic display. There is no cynicism or irony at the corner of North and McClellan, and Moose seemed hurt that a Hollywood director could introduce such notions into his carefully tended garden of Americana.

"Mr. Moore," he said, his voice welling, "how can you do this when you say you love this country and you talk for

the small man? Mr. Moore, you broke our heart, just like 9/11 broke this country's heart."

Moose gets emotional over two subjects — America and his wife. In his mind, Moore had violated both.

At first, Moose tried to give his house to a soldier. He went to a Veterans Administration hospital and a Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall, but in both places he got the same reaction. The North End? That's the most violent drug marketplace in Flint. He offered the house to a member of the Flint Area Good News Riders, the Christian motorcyclists group that attends Memorial Day candlelight vigils at the Corner. They didn't want it either.

"Because of the violence and all the hatred, it's been very hard," Moose said. "Everybody basically said they don't want to live here because of what's here. But it's peaceful compared to what it was. When we moved in here 19 years ago, the news people reported on drug deals. They talked about it being a curbside drug market. But now all the properties around here are clear, so someone can come in and build the life they want."

By June, having failed in three attempts to give away his house, Moose thought about a young man who'd grown up in the North End, just a block away from the Corner. Moose had known Jevon since he was 8 or 9. One day, he was packing his poles in the truck to go fishing. A bunch of neighborhood kids saw him, and asked to go along.

"I took 'em out fishing, and every one of 'em caught a fish but me," he recalled. (I found out about Moose's plans to give away his house when he called me last month. Nowadays, most people keep in touch by emailing or leaving curt messages on Facebook, but Moose still calls people. Usually, he calls me on holidays — Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July — but this time he called just to say hello and tell me to "give hugs and kisses" to my 3-month-old daughter.)

When Moose and Suzie were building the memorial, Jevon traced an outline of the New York City skyline on the platform in front of the mural. Jevon was married now, with a 6-year-old son and a 4-month-old daughter. But the young

"Iraq din't have nothin' to do with 9/11, I can't wait until the war is over. I wish we never gone into Iraq."

— Suzie Fitch

make it to New Mexico. That would be enough to fix up his 1991 GMC Safari for the 1,500-mile drive, and rent him and Suzie an apartment until they could find jobs. He had a check coming from a drywall job that would finance the move.

Moose and Suzie could have raised enough money by selling their house. Flint has the lowest housing prices in the United States, an average of \$15,000. It's not just that 90 percent of the auto industry jobs are gone and that Flint is the most violent city in the English-speaking world, with a murder rate of 60 per 100,000, equal to Latin American drug capitals. It's that 21st century Americans don't want to live in the workingman's specials Flint threw up to house the Michigan dirt farmers, Ozark mountaineers, and African-American sharecroppers who flooded the city in the 1920s and 1930s to build Buicks and Chevys. Moose's house is three bedrooms, 900 square feet, full bath up, half bath down. Now,

decided to give away his house, along with the requirement that the new owners tend the Corner.

"Being poor like we are, we're going to be poor here, or we're going to be poor somewhere else," he says. "It's a leg up for someone."

Another reason Moose was eager to find new occupants: In Flint, empty houses are stripped of copper piping, plumbing fixtures, chain-link fences, and any other metal that desperate scavengers can sell at the scrap yard, as they try to salvage every last nickel of wealth remaining in the city. It's not unknown for scavengers to carry boilers down the street in broad daylight. The police don't stop them. They've got deeper shit to deal with. A few years ago, the mayor laid off a third of the force, and now it takes cops 50 minutes to respond to a shooting. That's why Flint has so many murders. If you have 50 minutes to get away, what's the deterrent?

Maybe Moose was naïve to think

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family was too poor to afford its own place. Jevon sometimes earned money doing manual labor, such as tearing down trailers, but he was unemployed now. His wife, Cassidy, worked 20 hours a week at McDonald's, earning \$8.47 an hour. So they bounced around between relatives. They'd lived with Jevon's mom, on the North End. Now they were staying with Cassidy's mother, on the east side of Flint. Moose called him.

"Hey, young man," he asked. "How'd you like your own house?"

Jevon said he'd have to talk it over with his wife. When he did, Cassidy was speechless. The North End didn't scare them, because they'd lived there before. And they'd only have to pay \$133 a month in property taxes.

"Not being able to afford our own place, we've kind of been going by as we go," Cassidy told me when Moose set up a three-way call.

"This means everything to us. It's just so hard trying to do everything by myself, 'cause I'm the only one working."

There is only one stipulation: Jevon and Cassidy have to mow the grass on the Corner. Moose is going to continue paying property taxes on the Corner's three lots, until he can find someone who will continue adding the names of soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

Moose held one final candlelight vigil, on July 11. On that Saturday evening, he announced he and Suzie were leaving Flint for New Mexico, and introduced Jevon and Cassidy to his regular band of patriots. The following Friday, he headed for the Sun Belt. That day, his trailer

broke before he even got out of Flint, and he had to rent one from U-Haul. But on Saturday, the truck made it to the home of Suzie's family in Illinois, the first leg of their journey. (Giving away a house in Flint is difficult; getting out of Flint is even tougher.) It's a path thousands of Flintstones have followed before. Flint's population is half what it was in 1960, when it topped out at 196,000. But unlike so many of the migrants who preceded him, his place in Flint won't be filled by blight or weeds.

"I'm obviously going to mow it," Cassidy said of the Corner. "I haven't really decided beyond that. We'll go as it goes."

Less than a week after the Fitches left town, scavengers stole the top middle panel of the mural, which was secured to the frame with 35 screws, toppling the angel and leaving a missing piece in the American flag. Without its creators to look after it, the Corner is going the way of all Flint.

"It's already starting to be destroyed, and we ain't even been gone a week," Moose said when he heard about the desecration. His voice broke: "You give something out of love, and this is what you'd get back. I was hoping they'd at least leave it alone for six months."

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