

Originally published June 29, 2006

UP hermit comes out, confirms that he's OK

By SUSAN AGER
Free Press Columnist

Reader comments: Shiu-Win Lee, of Farmington, said: "One of my favorites was when you found that man up north who was living in seclusion. I'm glad you were able to find him and report to his family that he was still alive."

"Please go to Grand Marais," the old man told me, his voice crackly on the phone, "and see if you can find my brother. He's a hermit, and he lives in the woods 9 miles outside town, in an aluminum trailer, with no electricity and no water.

"The guy won't write and he won't call, and I'm 88 and can't get up there anymore. It's been -- oh, heavens -- 25 years ago since I seen him with my own eyes, and five years since I heard from him.

"Go into any tavern, and ask for Dapper Dan."

I might have picked up the phone to try to find the lost brother of Hank DeSautel. Hank lives in a senior home in Adrian.

But, I'm spending the summer going where readers tell me to go. So, this week I drove up to this remote clutch of structures on Lake Superior's south shore, at the northern edge of the east-central Upper Peninsula. Grand Marais is a sleepy and simple little town of about 400 people, and it's pretty much surrounded by either forests or water. As one local puts it: "We're not the end of the world, but you can see it from here."

The mission, defined

We pull in just before midnight when everything is dark but a light in the window of the Lake Superior Brewing Co. We can see the chairs are upturned on the tables but push open the door anyhow.

Two guys are at the bar, and the bartender nods when I ask, "Can we still get a drink?"

Pleasantries all around. Then, I lay out my mission. "I'm looking for a guy they call Dapper Dan," I say, and all three men nod.

"We all know Dapper," one says. "Yep," says the bartender, "he was in here just the other day. He always asks about my daughters, by name, even though he met them only once about 10 years ago.

"He made his money in the oil fields in Alaska," the bartender says, "but when he came here he married some young girl who took all his money and left. At least that's the story. He lives off the land. He shoots deer and rabbits, no matter if it's hunting season. And, well, you just gotta respect a guy who can live out in the woods like that.

"He's sharp as hell. He'll waver a bit. He'll get on the Bible a bit. But he's sharp."

I'm surprised. I expected Dan to be dead, and feared I'd have to give Hank the news. But now I want to meet him and decide to contact a guy the bartender says can probably lead me out to Dan's deep-woods home.

Dan's fans

At breakfast at a restored eatery called West Bay Diner, I discover everybody else knows Dan, too. And everybody likes him. One woman calls him "a dear, dear man."

The cook, who co-owns the place with his wife, is particularly protective of Dan.

Rick Guth tells me, "It ain't really fair to go out knockin' on his door. He's kind of like a fisherman who's spent his whole life on a boat. He's not dangerous, but he might just walk out into the woods and ignore you."

He offers, though, to drive out there right now, a 40-minute round trip, to see if Dapper Dan will see me.

Rick abandons his grill, while his wife hopes nobody arrives hungry for bacon and eggs.

From everyone we meet in Grand Marais we hear Dapper Dan stories. He lives in an old Airstream. He has no phone. He buries food in the ground to preserve it. He uses propane lanterns for light. He cooks on a little camp stove. He raises chickens. His yard is cluttered with pieces and parts of this and that (but don't hold that against him). He once spent a February in jail after a late-night high-alcohol auto accident (but he doesn't drink anymore). He liked jail so much he asked if he could do time every February.

Ellen Airgood, Rick's wife, calls him a complex, generous man. When they first opened the diner, Dan bought four cream pies, on a hot summer day. Minutes later, she spotted him giving the pies away. Now, she says, "He'll buy 10 pounds of meat" -- her husband sells venison -- "and try to give you a \$20 tip."

When Rick returns, he calls me to a quiet spot in the diner. "Dapper Dan is pretty adamant about people not going out there. But I talked him into coming in, and he said he would."

I'm dubious. But 20 minutes later, as we're still talking about him, Rick yelps, "There he is, right there!" He points out the window at a stocky guy in a red helmet on a bright-blue four-wheeler, rolling towards the bay.

The face-to-face

I track Dan down in the supermarket, where his cart is half-full. I introduce myself and explain that I have come on behalf of his brother, who worries about him.

Dan replies, "Is that all he has to do?"

Our conversation is erratic. He's friendly and chatty, but hard to track.

He hands me a stained folded sheet from his pocket full of Biblical analysis, and begins to rant about the four churches in town. "All liars!" And, did I know Dick Cheney killed those 3,000 people in the World Trade Center? Did I know Bill Clinton murdered Sonny Bono?

I steer the talk back to his brother. "Where's he living now?" Dan asks, two or three times. He seems concerned one moment, dismissive the next.

He pushes his cart toward the check-out lane. Then, out of the blue: "I'm 5-foot-7, and I weigh 250 pounds. It's terrible. I'm fat."

He wears heavy boots and droopy jeans. His glasses are thick and dark-rimmed. Blood on his chin looks like a shaving nick. When he checks out, he pays \$28.59 for the contents of his shopping cart: three bottles of soy sauce, eight jars of Bac-Os bacon bits and 10 cans of sliced beets.

He tells me he can "live like a king" off his \$809 monthly Social Security check, especially if he stays in the woods all winter, never coming to town, saving every penny.

The about-face

We're standing on the sidewalk now. He tells me he turned 73 in January. We talk about the high price of auto insurance, which is why he doesn't drive a car anymore.

Then, in a sudden burst of personal history, he says, "I moved out here to be different, just to be different. Where else could you retire at 42? When I worked in Alaska I took home more than \$1,000 a week, so I had \$60,000 in cash when I came here in 1974."

He bought a lot of land, he says. He has 40 acres left.

"I'll buy you dinner," he says, to my surprise. How about coffee? I suggest.

"You don't want to talk to me anymore," he says, looking me dead in the eye. "I'm a loser."

"You're not a loser," I stammer. "Everybody likes you." But he shakes his head. "No, they don't."

We agree -- I think we do -- to meet at the diner. I return to my motel and, 10 minutes later, Dapper Dan and his four-wheeler are gone.

Half of me is crushed. The other half is glad Dan dances to his own music.

Nobody can say when Dan will show up in town again.

The next morning I call Hank to report his brother is alive and well. He thanks me, and blesses me, and tells me how brilliant Dan was. Hank sighs: "He was really something."

He still is.