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Portrait Essay

Welcome to the Gravel Capital of the World

Every second grader at Oxford Elementary must endure the same strangely surreal field trip to the gravel pits each year -- an experience one with a fear of heights or a touchy asthmatic cough finds hard to forget. The teachers, all warm, grandmotherly women with short, slightly graying bobs of hair round us up after lunch, breezily dividing us up into pairs and escorting us like a group of juvenile prisoners away from the playground and to the waiting line of yellow buses outside. As soon as one bus is full, it pulls away from the curb and the next is loaded with pairs of excited and antsy children who know the appeal of the place they're about to go. It's the first trip to the pits (Koenig Sand and Gravel this time), the one place you've never gotten to go inside before, the dangerous and mysterious fenced off area east of the village that no child has been to (except for Cody Thybault of course, who just had to point out that his dad worked at another pit, American Aggregates, up on Ray Road). Mrs. Coram hands each of us a sandwich sized Ziploc bag for our "goodies" and directs us to our seats, reminding us about our indoor voices on the bus.

A quick search for Oxford, Michigan on the internet can reveal the history of the gravel pits and their importance to the town. In the early 1900s, miners traveling up through rural Michigan found that the small village of Oxford sat on a huge gravel vein left behind by glaciers millions of years ago. Companies flocked to the town, picking and dividing up large tracts of land to dig and profit. And dig they did -- over five million tons of gravel were shipped out of Oxford nationally and internationally a year at its height. As a result, somewhere along those

years of digging and shipping, Oxford was given the title of “Gravel Capital of the World.” This accomplishment, one that Oxford’s young students are taught to take pride in early on, gave us enthusiastic second-graders even more reason to be excited for this big day -- in my mind we were seeing the epitome of our history, becoming initiated into the status of true a Oxfordian.

The bus ride to the pits is a short one, only about five minutes north of the school, but far enough as to dissuade a group of four elementary teachers from trying to make the trip with eighty second-graders by foot. We follow Mechanic Street, shady and quiet, to the intersection of M-24, the busy, bustling roadway on which everything and everyone drives. Our bus hums as it passes through downtown; shops and stores seem to tower over us on either side and Centennial Park, with its understated pavilion and garden of tulips, flies by on the left as the bus continues to head north, up to the outskirts of town. We know what’s coming, our excitement is mounting. The road’s dust begins to fill the open windows of the bus, the dryness of the dirt making it hard to breathe. WELCOME TO THE GRAVEL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD, a faded wooden sign reads just before we turn onto a wide dirt road hidden between two enormous bushes, originally meant to look deep green but now covered by a thin layer of chalky brown dirt. We pass dusty gravel trucks filled with stones and gigantic cranes floating high in the air. The buses wind around deep ravines and manmade lakes pitch black and sinister.

There seems to be a consensus of either pure excitement or slight disappointment from those around me. My best friend Crystal sits gazing out of the window at the idle bulldozers, picking her nose; Cody Thybault stands on top of his seat at the back of the bus, pointing his finger down the steep slope to the lake below, explaining to us that it’s that exact sort of lake that his dad digs up diamonds from (which us second-graders wholeheartedly believed at the time, but as of today, to my knowledge there have never been diamonds found in the gravel pits of

Oxford, Michigan). There's not much happening, men in bright yellow vests are standing around near a pickup truck, and the excitement dies down on the bus with kids quickly losing interest in the empty machinery and piles of dirt and stones dotting the ground around us.

Though I'm sure we were given one, I don't remember anything about a tour of the gravel pit. My classmates' interest waned as we realized that this wasn't some exciting and mysterious piece of land hidden away -- It was just a boring old area of water and dirt. We got to fill up our Ziploc bags with "goodies," which actually just involved us getting off of the bus and sifting through the mounds of dirt and stone to load our bags with rocks we found. How disappointing was it to realize that there was nothing special about those stones and chunks of concrete (I could have found an even more interesting one in my backyard), and especially that there were no diamonds in those piles (believe me, I searched).

After that trip there seemed to be less emphasis placed on Oxford's famous title. Maybe that was because we stopped believing in its mysterious allure, or maybe it's because the gravel pits began to take a turn for the worse as the economy buckled, I'm not quite sure at this point. What I do know is that the wooden sign outside of Koenig Sand and Gravel was gone one day when I was in fifth grade and never put back up. I also know that Cody Thybault ended up working at American Aggregates, just like his father, after graduating high school, and still lives in the same house with his parents to this day. I can only imagine his joy (or has it turned to boredom by now?) at being able to operate the cranes and bulldozers he always described to us. Who knows, maybe he's even found a diamond or two by now down in the deep jet black lakes his dad was digging at all those years ago.

In eighth grade, Mark Hickmott (or Uncle Mark as most of us lovingly knew him) drowned at the American Aggregates gravel pit off of Ray Road. His clamshell dredge, a giant piece of machinery used to remove gravel from deep bodies of water, capsized unexpectedly due to an unsupported modification in the design, leaving the machine and his body trapped in 115 feet of water.

Uncle Mark was a big and boisterous man with a wife, two sons, and a laugh floated over all of the voices in a crowded room. He was my best friend Crystal's uncle, but more than that he was the man everyone in Oxford knew in some way -- whether it was through his annual hunting trips or the casual way he struck up conversations with strangers in line at the deli of the local grocery store. He was loud, he loved, and he was a lifelong resident of Oxford with eight years of experience in the gravel pits under his belt. Flowers and candles were placed at the north gate to American Aggregates that night and throughout the week. In seventh hour the next day, the middle school observed a moment of silence in honor of Uncle Mark -- his passing so sudden and tragic.

No one could have expected such a terrible thing to happen in such an important yet boring place like the gravel pits. The business once so crucial to the town's economy was shutting down slowly and showing no signs of renewal in the near future. Five days later, what seemed to be the entire town crowded the small Lynch and Brothers funeral home to pay their last respects to Uncle Mark. Parents sent their kids to sit in the back with their friends while they chatted solemnly with their neighbors and acquaintances. Bits of conversation drifted throughout the room from the somber adults:

"So sad, isn't it? I brought them a ham casserole the other night, and Debbie looked so overwhelmed."

“I’ll sure miss Mark at the Strawberry Festival next year.”

“Those poor, poor boys without Mark around. When I take over a Shepherd’s Pie to Debbie’s tonight, I’ll ask if there’s anything we can do.”

Trying to be supportive, to compensate in any way possible for the loss of such a well-loved man, their faces hung low, brushing against their stiff, black collars and wondering how much time they’d have left with their family and friends. It is difficult to think about the way that death can creep up on you and make you face your mortality in such scary and unexpected ways, and this unforeseen death did just that.

Most residents agree Uncle Mark’s funeral procession was the longest they’d ever seen wind through Oxford, with lines of flagged cars driving and even more choosing to walk the short distance up Cemetery Hill to the North Oxford Cemetery. A sea of black clustered together up the uneven sidewalk, my own feet crunching with each step on the bright orange and red leaves falling from the radiant blue sky above. Two police cars sat waiting, directing a detour away from the hill and through the adjacent subdivision called “Waterstone” (a relatively new area of homes developed on the same land that was once a substantial gravel pit back in the 50s). The women in front of me walked quickly, holding their children’s hands, while their husbands and brothers lingered behind them, following with their hats off and held distinctly at their side. Mostly silent, except for the few young children unable to understand what was happening, we gathered as close as we could to the grassy clearing. Past the large crowd to my left I could see the thin wire fence separating the cemetery and the subdivision -- a grey rooftop peeking through the bare branches of a few trees, and a children’s play structure in the small yard backing up to the steep dirt wall of the graveyard. I saw inside the house’s windows, the blinds pulled back to reveal a tidy living room and an abnormally large flat screen TV. Around the right side of the

beige home, one of the many lakes (a man-made hole that probably produced thousands of pounds of gravel from its terrifyingly dark depths, and one similar in size to that fateful pit at American Aggregates) glistened against the sun. How strange it was that even in a uniquely personal time of grief and suffering, the gravel pits were always so close – in a sense we cannot escape them. Their scope and their influence on Oxford's history stays with us even in those moments that we'd much rather forget, such as that day. I feel as though even now, seven years later, it's hard to separate the town from the gravel sites within its borders. It's amazing to think that those vast tracks of land, once so significant to the economy, are now simply subdivisions and recreational lakes to the younger generations who know much less about their past.

I hugged Crystal and her family, watched the brims of their eyes begin to water, and felt the quiet tears of everyone around me. In this moment I felt as though everyone there was one, was a part of the quiet and supportive spirit that is Oxford. This heartbreaking event had hurt us, disappointed us, and made us question our security. These gravel pits, the ones we so reverently glorified to our youth, were shutting down, and now they had taken the life of one of our own. Those places our fathers and grandfathers worked in and our town prided itself on were not the bustling businesses that once employed our residents and kept meals on the table in happier decades. At the same time, the gravel pits would always connect us -- not only through the lakes and stones so ingrained in our history and legacy, but through the coming together of us all to honor one man, to comfort his family and one another. The pits, like Oxford, might have been on the down and out, but they echoed our sense of community -- nervous about the future, but trying to move forward just the same.

When the black panels went up around the other American Aggregates pit on Dunlap Road, the summer before my senior year of high school, it was all anybody could talk about. We all knew that Hugh Jackman was coming to film a new box office movie in the dusty remains of the closed plant, (officials said the site would only be closed for a year due to economic hardship, but a few years later it's still closed), and we couldn't shake the utter excitement of having a celebrity so close to our homes. It felt great to know that the gravel pit was being used for *something*, especially something so intriguing and mysterious -- the local paper reported that security would be tight, and that their "closed set" meant nobody would be allowed inside if they weren't connected to the movie.

So as one might expect, Oxford became a bit star struck. Businesses like "Victoria's Delights" started advertising "Hugh(e) Specials" (oh so clever), and numbers of cars parked outside in the dust of the main entrance to the pit every day, with hopeful residents trying to catch a glimpse of Mr. Jackman, plotting the ways they might obtain his autograph or maybe a sandwich wrapper he were to drop -- interesting mementos, but in the end useless. By night, the normally pitch black sky was emblazoned with the bright spotlights of the set, a weird yet comforting reminder of the action going on in our seemingly abandoned gravel pit. There was excitement about the future for the first time in a while thanks to that movie (one I don't think I should mention by name, but that did fairly well in theaters). The local paper reported different stories of residents claiming to have seen Hugh Jackman eating at "Victoria's Delights" (turns out this was false) or performing his own stunt, sliding down a long metal structure above the black barricades (I'm not sure if it's true, but it could be). *Maybe he'd stop by the grocery store down the street for a snack after filming! Perhaps he'd come to the gate and sign autographs for*

us, smiling and posing for pictures like the cheerful man he seems. Maybe he'd see how nice of a town Oxford is and buy a house here!

And just like that, it was over. The crew was only in town for a week, and after they left, everything went back to the way it had been. Workers tore down the set and American Aggregates stayed closed. The sky returned to its serene darkness. Everyone in Oxford quickly forgot about the past excitement. What seemed like such a promising event, one that inspired hope in a lot of our community, came and went with little repercussions. The Dunlap Road pit was still there, sitting empty and reminding all those who drove past it daily of the quick glimpse of optimism we were provided, and ultimately tried to forget.

Despite being away at college majority of the year, I still enjoy reading up on the latest Oxford news each Wednesday when the webpage of our local newspaper, the Oxford Leader, is updated. Just three months ago, I saw the most interesting article that caught my eye, right under the Police Blotter: "COUNTY EXPLORES KOENIG FOR MULTI-USE PARK." As it turns out, local officials are now pushing for the once busy land to become "a public recreational area that would allow users to drive off-road vehicles (ORV), engage in water sports and enjoy other outdoor activities including mountain biking, zip lines and horseback riding."¹ Reading this, I thought it sounded like a great idea -- using the pits in a productive way, and bringing a little more business and travel to Oxford. I remembered seeing Koenig Sand and Gravel while still in production back in elementary school, large cranes and bulldozers pushing stone from across the wide basin it had come out of. And then I remembered the idleness I had seen last summer as I

¹ CJ Carnacchio, "County explores Koenig land for multi-use park." *The Oxford Leader*, 6 March 2013. Web.

drove past -- no more cranes in action or men standing near their pickup trucks in bright vests.

Why wouldn't you want to do something with the site? I thought to myself.

Last week I found out exactly why. The Oxford Leader's new article summarizing the town council meeting about the park struck me as both perplexing yet strikingly honest. About fifty residents showed up in mid-July for the discussion on what to do with the 1,200 acre grant of land that Koenig Sand and Gravel used to operate on, and the opinions were mixed. Some felt as I did -- the opportunity would be a great chance for Oxford to grow. However, many also rallied to object the proposal for fear of a number of concerns including but not limited to: lowering of property values, increased traffic, noise and gas pollution, the fact that the "type" of people it would attract are not those we want in our community, and an increase in local taxes. While most of these are completely legitimate concerns, I struggle to see the harm in creating a new space for business and community to grow. What else might we do with all of that land... Wait around and see the space go to waste? Maybe I'm too far removed from the situation and place to be thinking about it clearly, having been gone for three years at school. I ask myself how my opinion might be different if I was still deeply invested in my hometown, and don't know the answer.

My mom brought up the proposal in one of our phone conversations just recently and surprised me when she expressed her dislike of the idea. As someone who has lived in Oxford her entire life, I was a bit confused by her sureness. "Why not?" I questioned her.

She explained that it would mean too many people, too much pollution, and wouldn't do much of anything for Oxford. "There's really no point -- either way, there won't be any jobs created from leaving it or making it some park. Why don't we just leave it alone?" I didn't know what to say. It was her opinion and she had the right to it. Her perspective, as someone so

deeply connected to Oxford's past and future, is one of pride and cynicism. Pride in the town she loves so much, yet distrust in its history of prosperity, decline, and disappointment. It's those gravel pits that complete this cycle, the ones so affiliated with the great hope of finding diamonds and striking it rich -- and the subsequent discouragement of realizing that will never happen, with the fear and betrayal of trust that they took from us when Uncle Mark died, and with the quick glimmer of a promising future all too soon ending abruptly. And because of these complex feelings, I think that Oxford still isn't ready to let go of its gravel pits, or essentially, its past. It may be confusing, but these pits are home -- they're a part of our small, largely unknown town that those who live there won't forget. Their cavernous lakes and dusty roads seem inviting gestures, hoping to lure us into their gates and keep us there forever. And so they might, since it's so hard to resist the memories and hopes that the gravel pits have inspired over all these years. Hope, fear, sadness, anxiety; as our stronghold and rock, it is these pits that have been there for us when we needed it or not. So the question is, should we hold on to the past, or is it time to move on?