

1997 Year-end letter by John and Mary Lou Tanton

AT YEAR'S END 1997

It's a peaceful Sunday afternoon, with ten days left in deer season. That means going for a walk in the woods is out of the question. So what better way to spend the time than sitting at the dining room table, looking out the window at our first good snowstorm of the season, and musing about the year that was?

January brought several big storms that closed schools and virtually shut down Burns Clinic where I work. We always cherish these interludes; a chance to put our feet up, read a bit, and slow down. One of the storms included much ice, which took down many limbs, and blocked one of our favorite cross-country ski trails. I spent a day with friends, helping to clear it out. Good vigorous fun that leaves one with rosy cheeks and a good appetite!

In early February, we traveled to New York City to enjoy four operas in three days, a package the Metropolitan Opera Company puts together for folks like us from the "outback." The performances were well-done, and the scenery changes amazing. The trip afforded the chance to meet some old friends, including Peter Brimelow, a *Forbes* magazine senior editor, who has been promoting me as a candidate for the United States Senate race in the year 2000, running against our junior Michigan Senator, Spencer Abraham. This proposal has netted mention on the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* and a front-page article in *The Detroit Free Press*. The possibility is interesting, though the race is still three years away. The reason for the proposal: Senator Abraham chairs the Immigration Sub-Committee in the Senate, and is about as far away from our position on immigration as one could get. So we'll see what develops.

We also visited with David and Annie Bingham, up in Connecticut. Dave is an obstetrician who has run for both congress and a state senate seat. He had much practical advice to offer on running for office. In his congressional race, Dave ran as an independent, got 15 percent of the vote - in a race that was decided by 20 votes (the incumbent won). It was the closest House race in U.S. history.

Later in the month, we journeyed to the opposite extreme of New York City: we took the Algoma Central Railway 118 miles north of Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario, and got off at a whistle stop in the Canadian "bush" to spend a long weekend cross-country skiing at a hunting and fishing camp that caters to skiers in the winter time (see the photo). This last weekend in February lived up to its reputation as the sunniest, but coldest part of the year. It got down to -20° Fahrenheit. The resultant clear skies afforded sunny days and an excellent view of Comet Hale-Bopp at night. We had good food, wood fires, and a wind generator for electricity.

One of my medical partners retired in February, turning my own thinking strongly in that direction. I have decided to follow his lead, as explained on the enclosed sheet,

which I have been passing along to my patients. Completing the transition to, as the British say, the super-annuated status will be, I'm sure, the main event of 1998 for us. Mary Lou retired from her low-vision rehabilitation work earlier this year.

In March, the U.S. Supreme Court came down with its decision in the Arizona English case - we won - 9-0! Last year, I explained how this case had begun in 1988, the day after Arizona voters passed an initiative making English the official language of the state. A number of us worked hard to both put that initiative on the ballot, and to get it passed. We then pursued the lengthy (and expensive) court battles through the federal district court, up to the federal appeals court (twice!) and finally on up to the Supreme Court. But it's not over yet: another case is before the Arizona State Supreme Court, in which we are still active. All of the arguments are complete; a decision could come at any time ... probably in 1998. We'll report back next year.

March also saw a melancholy closing down of the Tanton family farm home in the Thumb of Michigan. My mother, Hannah, now age 89, and still vigorous of mind and body, decided against another confining winter in the ancestral homestead, and moved to Park Place Living Center in Kalamazoo, close to my sister's home. The family gathered to disperse the accumulations of 50 years of living in the same dwelling, with mementos going to the children and grandchildren. This was actually the house where my mother was raised, and to which she and the rest of us moved in 1945 after a twenty-year interlude in Detroit. The house and farm will pass to mother's grand nephew, and so will stay in the family, where it has now been for over 100 years.

In April, Mary Lou and I headed for New Mexico. That month is the dreariest of our year weather wise and slowest medically, as many of our patients go south for the winter, and don't start coming back until May.

We flew to Albuquerque, rented a 26-foot motor home, and took off for Carlsbad Caverns National Park, where we joined an expedition of botanists from the University of New Mexico. It was great fun following our botanical interests into a desert region. We again visited the Caverns, as we had with our daughters in 1969.

From there we proceeded to Texas and Guadalupe Mountains National Park, established during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. We had fine hikes there, and got another look at Comet Hale-Bopp in the black desert skies, this time at its closest approach to earth. Both tails were clearly visible.

From El Paso, we walked one of the three bridges into Mexico, to again experience the contrast between the two sides of the border. Over 40 million people cross into the United States each year on these bridges - many are daily commuters. One can imagine the difficulty of trying to screen from this huge number those with false or improper documents. We visited the U.S. Border Patrol headquarters nearby, and saw their new computerized system for fingerprinting and photographing illegal aliens, which promises to be a substantial help in controlling the flow. But numbers continue to build on both sides of the border, so despite technology, the problem will increase.

Our next destination was Silver City in southwestern New Mexico, bordering the Gila and Aldo Leopold wilderness areas. Leopold was a forester with the U.S. Forest Service, the one who instigated the wilderness system in the United States. As longtime devotees of that system, we had wanted to make a hiking pilgrimage to both of these areas, the first wilderness areas established in the United States (see the photo).

Other stops in New Mexico included the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge on the Rio Grande River, the Very Large Array of radio telescopes in the west central part of the state, and two national monuments, El Morro (Inscription Rock on the Mormon Trail), and El Malpais ("the badlands"). Getting there took us through Catron County, which is the real Wild West. Several years ago, the county's commissioners passed an ordinance requiring all residents to carry a sidearm!

In Albuquerque, a botanist we had met at Carlsbad took us on a nice hike to a local natural area. Then we traveled to Los Alamos to see the Bradford Nuclear Museum with exhibits depicting the development of the atomic bomb. We enjoyed several wonderful days at nearby Bandelier National Monument, which offered ancient cliff dwellings as well as fine camping and hiking. Thus ended a great tour - we look forward to seeing more of the wonders of the USA after I leave my medical practice.

May found us back home and in the garden. We both still love digging in the dirt - maybe there is a Freudian explanation for this! Nineteen ninety-seven proved a good year for peppers and leeks, but a lean one for potatoes and melons. The glads were elegant and provided cut flowers until the first hard frost.

In June we took a five-day ecology course at the University of Michigan Biological Station near Petoskey. Taught by John Cairns, one the leading ecologists in the country, it provided good training and excellent background for the disaster that our bees suffered this past summer. For the past two summers, our bees co-existed (pesticide free) with the parasitic mites that have infested virtually all domesticated (and wild) bees in the U.S. But this summer the mite population simply exploded! Many bees hatched without wings or legs, which had been chewed off by the mites during the bees' metamorphosis from larva to adults. By early June, it was clear that the entire apiary would be dead within a month or six weeks - so I gave in and applied the miticide. It worked very well - five of the ten hives we started with in the spring survived and went into the winter in quite good condition. But just as with using antibiotics for infectious diseases, we know that the mites will in short order become resistant to the pesticide, and then what? That was the subject of a conference on bees, which we attended in June at our alma mater, Michigan State University. The mite problem is worldwide, and no one knows what to do about it. Attempts to breed a resistant bee have not yet succeeded. The decline in bee numbers will have substantial implications for agricultural crops that require fertilization by bees.

Mary Lou continues to work hard at Scenic Michigan, which she chairs. Their main project is trying to control the proliferation of billboards in Michigan. The job requires a trip to the state capitol of Lansing every month.

July and August afforded many pleasant hours botanizing in the local fields, forests, and streams. My botanical mentor, Professor Edward Voss of the University of Michigan, recently published the third and final volume of his *Michigan Flora*. I took it with me on the highways and byways of our area and had a fine time identifying a good many plants that I had not seen or recognized before. During the summer of 1998, I plan to retake Professor Voss's field botany course, which I took from him in 1968 - 30 years ago.

August saw the 25th anniversary of the Little Traverse Conservancy, a local land preservation group that I helped found in 1972, in the wake of several high profile land-use lawsuits to which a number of us were party. Our Conservancy has protected some 10,000 acres through donation, purchase, or easement, making it a substantial force in our rapidly developing area.

Our elder daughter, Laura, was home for a visit during August, and asked us how many years it had been since we had gone to the beach. It was more than we cared to remember, so we actually took a break and whiled away an afternoon at the local state park, situated on the Lake Michigan shore. We also took Laura on a day trip to Mackinac Island, which some see as a tourist trap, but which we very much enjoy visiting once or twice a year. The boat ride past the Mackinac Bridge is spectacular, and the absence of motor vehicles on the island makes for pleasant walking, even though it is crowded. We went back to the island at the end of the season with friends for the annual music and eating festival, and were sated on both counts.

In late August, Mary Lou and I revisited Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, on the south shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. We had fine weather for the boat trip along the rocks, and for several days of camping and hiking in the interior of the park. The raccoons made a shambles of our food supply the night we failed to store it properly. At this time in our lives, we can't seem to get enough of hiking and the constantly changing scene it affords.

In September, we attended my 45th high school class reunion. Of the original 39, 33 are still with us, and most of them showed up for the reunion. Great fun!

The ophthalmology department where I trained at the University of Michigan celebrated its 125th anniversary last fall - another enjoyable and memorable gathering.

Back home we put the garden to bed for the winter, burying carrots, beets, leeks, and potatoes under leaf mounds, where they will avoid freezing, and hence can be dug out of the snow as the winter progresses. The Brussels sprouts, kale, parsnips, and scallions will do fine on their own without protection, as will the spring crop of spinach. A hardy biennial, it was planted in August, got well established, and should over winter

In mid October, Mary Lou and I did something we long talked about; we planted ourselves for twenty-four hours in the same spot, and watched the turning of day, with no distractions from radio, TV, telephone, or papers. Just watching, smelling, listening, feeling - using four of the five senses (we didn't find anything to taste, to use the fifth one). It was one of the most colorful weekends of the fall. The site, for which we are the temporary custodians, hopefully for another 30 years or so, was a quarter section of land not far from our house. Much of it is wooded, including a 35-acre red pine wood lot (see the photo), but there are some fine open fields, and no interfering city lights nearby. At night, the constellations really stood out. During the day, we indulged in one of our favorite past times - trimming the dead lower limbs off the red pines.

Also in October, we had our fall cycle of meetings near Washington, D.C.: the board meeting for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, of which I am currently chairman, the twenty-first Writers' Workshop on population, immigration, language, and national unity questions, and an English Language Advocates board meeting. Then we attended in San Francisco my last meeting of the American Academy of Ophthalmology as a practicing ophthalmologist. We spent several days prior to the meeting at Yosemite National Park, which Mary Lou had never visited, and which I had not seen for some thirty years. We had splendid weather and hikes, and while the bears did not break into our car - they raised havoc with a good many others!

Daughter Laura is closing in on her master's degree in social work at Eastern Carolina University, in Greenville, North Carolina. She will graduate next May. Our younger daughter, Jane, has embarked on a master's degree in public health at the University of Michigan, where she continues as a part-time operating room nurse in plastic surgery. Both girls remain unattached and thus can usually come home for the holidays - something we all always enjoy. These celebrations give us pause to reflect on our good fortune. admitting that much can be traced more to luck than virtue.

We hope that you and yours have a pleasant holiday season, as we all look forward to a new year and, in a few years, the turning of the century and the millennium.

John and Mary Lou