

A 'decisive moment' in time

I tidied up my desk last week and after moving an old envelop a few times, I decided to open it. I knew by the stamp on the envelop that it was an aerial photograph of my farm, taken years ago by someone who had boarded a small airplane and photographed working farms in the area.

Those guys were quite common back then—they'd fly over and shoot a bunch of farms in the area and then drop by the farm a few days later to see if they could sell some aerials of the property.

Usually, my dad would politely say he wasn't interested, but on this one occasion, I guess the guy caught him at a weak moment.. He bought a print of the farm—a detailed study in greens and browns of the Brown farm taken from 1,000 feet.

My mother had written the year 1975 on the back of it, but after I did some thinking, and studied the details of the print, I realized that was impossible—it had to be 1976. The summer of 1976, to be exact— probably right about this same time of the year.

I must admit, it's almost spooky to study a photograph of something so familiar as my life-long home, frozen in time 30 years ago. The one thing that told me it wasn't 1975, was one of our two silos. It was already standing—that same silo wasn't built until the fall of 1975.

I could see the photo was taken in summer. I could actually see the freshly cut hay fields, the brown stubble showing through, and the bright red mower-conditioner was parked in one field.

Around the barn was the large paddock where 40 dairy cattle lay basking in the sun, and the small field around the farmhouse showed a dozen young cattle grazing on the grass in the fenced area. That same area is now lawn, while the paddock is now part of a much larger hay field. There were apple trees where there are none today, and the driveway up to the barn was a well-worn gravel road, kept bare by the wheels of the milk truck, which picked

Ted Brown



up every other day. Today, it's a grassy driveway.

The barns look the same and the old stone milk house hasn't changed a bit. Even the little frame henhouse is the same as it was 30 years ago.

But I think the most obvious thing staring me in the face was there was no evidence of my parents' house, not a trace of it at all. That house was built during the summer of 1977, which also confirmed the fact the photo was taken in 1976.

When one talks about 1976, it seems like only a few years ago (to people my age anyway.) But if you really think about it being 30 years ago— almost one-third of a century—the perspective changes dramatically.

As I looked at the photo, the expression "the decisive moment" came to mind. The phrase, coined by 1930s French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson, was used to explain how he waited for all elements to come together at one precise instant, to visually freeze that moment in time.

And sometime, in the summer of 1976, all the elements did come together in the viewfinder of a camera in the hands of a photographer in some small engine airplane, to freeze that moment.

The proof of Cartier-Bresson's theory was in my hand. The cattle are long gone, the buildings have endured countless hot summer days since that moment, and many cold winter ones as well.

And time marches on, until another photographer freezes another 'decisive moment' in time.

(Ted Brown can be reached at tbrown@independentfreepress.com)

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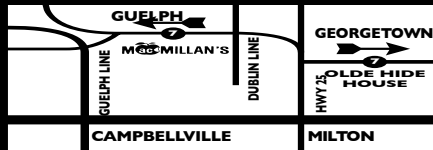
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