



Another day begins on King Street

This is a picture of Midland's downtown core, heading south on King Street. Picture was snapped one early morning just as shops

began opening for another day. The tree-lined street is a popular place for shoppers and visitors not only during the summer months

but year 'round. King Street North literally leads to the Gateway to the 30,000 islands at

town docks which is also a popular place week in and week out.

And now some notes from the front

Shirley Whittington

A giant yellow moon hung low in the eastern sky. The world was wrapped in the serenity of early small-town evening.

We were sitting outdoors. The dishes were done. The evening paper had been read and discarded. The youngsters had gone spinning off on their bikes, and we were alone. Our visitor looked at me earnestly and lowered his voice to a confidential murmur.

"I love," he said, "your verandah."
"Aw shucks," I said modestly. "It's nothing. Look - the railing's rotting."

But he would not be dissuaded. He told us he'd known patios and balconies, sun decks and Florida rooms, but that none of them had inspired the same sweet peace as did our sagging front porch with the spider plant and the uninterrupted view of the red mail box on the corner. It was, he said, pure nostalgia. Nostalgia? Perhaps so.

Certainly that verandah is a pleasant spot to while away the hours. There's a creaky wicker rocker, a pile of old newspapers, and some department store catalogues. When one becomes bored with these simple entertainments, there is the world beyond to consider, as it passes our front walk.

Most of us have a shady verandah memory somewhere. The verandah was where the house-plants were put for their summer vacations, and where secrets were whispered on rainy afternoons. Peas were shelled, troths plighted and illicit cigarettes smoked. The verandah was where the milkman left the moisture beaded bottles each morning. (Yes dear. Milk used to come in bottles — glass ones which you can only buy now in antique shops.)

Here's a generally unsung advantage of the

front verandah. One can usually hear the footfalls of approaching visitors, like distant thunder, before they get to the doorbell. That's a sonic impossibility if you live in a house fronted with a cement stoop.

Mind you, verandahs aren't all iced tea and pretzels. They must be swept, and even scrubbed occasionally. Carpenter ants and wasps lurk. Railings wobble; paint peels; boards rot. There is scarcely a verandah owner who doesn't have occasional visions of an angry mailman, up to his hips in decomposed verandah boards, waving a law suit in his free hand.

The verandah was shouldered out of existence by something called the California or ranch-style bungalow — a structure which, despite its wild inappropriateness to our climate — was eagerly welcomed into the Canadian landscape.

Bungalows couldn't support verandahs. Instead, they were fronted with topless cement stoops. Many of these were given over to bisected barrels planted with petunias, and plastic boys in red coats who waited eternally to take the reins of someone's horse. There is

not room, in this formal dinkiness, for rocking chairs and piles of old department store catalogues.

Where to sit, then, on airless afternoons? People retreated to their backyard kingdoms, and furnished them with umbrellas, tables and chairs, barbecues and swimming pools.

Just this summer we have noticed that people are starting to sit out front more than they used to, with or without verandahs. They have discovered that the action is up front.

Older people have always known this. Not far from us there is a lavishly appointed and beautifully designed retirement community. (In the days of verandahs and glass milk bottles, I guess they would have called it an old folks' home.)

Anyway, at the back of this gorgeous building, there's a patio which overlooks a park and a limpid lake. And where do the residents cluster?

At the front door, because that's where the action is.

Maybe some of them are remembering front verandahs.

The water's off and the skunks are gone

Bill Smiley

No essay this week. No controlled, clear, coherent, concise evaluation of some piece of trivia, as is my wont.

It's quite difficult to keep one's brains unscrambled in a summer like this.

One day you are gasping around like a newly-caught fish, trying to extract enough oxygen from the humidity to remain alive.

Next day you are pounded on the head with hail — yes, hail — or you go down to the basement and there's a foot of water in it.

First couple of times, I mopped it up. Now, we just stay out of the basement until the indoor swimming-pool has dried up, by evaporation.

Once again, we have discussed at great length, what to do about the "patio." We call it that for want of a better word. We have two French doors leading onto the patio. The patio is a pile of rocks, ranging from three pounds to two hundred pounds.

It has no known purpose that we've ever been able to discover. It has no geometric or any other kind of design. It looks like something a cross-eyed architect, well into the grape, assembled one night with the aid of a bulldozer and a couple of bibulous, but mighty strong companions, in the belief that he was re-creating the Pantheon, in Rome.

And if you walk up the back path at night, with no lights on, one of the protruding rocks can give a hell of a rip on the shin.

Scattered among the patio rocks are bricks and half-bricks, pulled from the wall of the house by a vine that is a herbivorous Incredible Hulk. By day, it is a thing of beauty, making the old house look like something out of a book of Georgian prints of stately homes.

It must be at night that it turns into a monster, snatching bricks with its octopus-like tentacles and stuffing them into its voracious maw, except for those that dribble out of the corner of its mouth onto the patio.

And let's not speak of nights. Four mornings in a row I went out for my post-prandial coffee and morning paper.

Four mornings in a row, I dashed back into the house, white-faced, shouting things like: "Call the cops. Get the fire brigade. The Vandals are here, and maybe the Goths. The Martians have landed. Gimme some brandy."

Now my back lawn is not exactly pristine and perfect, a classic greensward. Let's say you couldn't bowl on it, unless you were using square bowling balls. It has its little ups and

downs, like the rest of us. Some almost of ski-hill potentiality. But it's mine and I like it.

How would you like to go out and discover that a herd of elephants had been grazing on your back lawn, during the small hours? There were divots there that Jack Nicklaus couldn't make with a nine iron.

There were holes that looked as though they'd been made by Mighty Mole. There was turf and grass and dung all over the place. It looked like a used car lot from which all the cars had been lifted by a mighty magnet.

Second time I saw it, I was cooler. Elephants make bigger droppings than that, and there's been no news report of a band of rogue elephants. I figured it was horses. But then I thought, horses eat grass, they don't kick holes in it.

Third morning, I knew it was the dogs next door, a couple of beautiful Pinch-your-man Dobers or something. But they're perfectly trained and kept in at night.

Finally, I knew. It was a kid I'd failed last June, getting back at me in some twisted fashion. I rapidly ran through the group, mentally and came up against a brick wall. They were all too lazy to do such a prodigious amount of damage.

Next we thought of coons. There are some around. But no self-respecting coon is going to be out there digging like a dingbat when all he has to do is whip the top of the garbage pail and regale himself on watermelon rinds and tag-ends of pizza.

Fifth night, we left on the outside light and I sat up all night with a brick in one hand and a hockey stick in the other. Nothing happened except that I fell asleep about two a.m. and dropped the brick on my bare foot.

Finally, as I should have done in the first place, I brought my neighbor, a man of eminent good sense and wide knowledge, over to view the vandalism.

He looked at me pityingly, as he so often does. But he's not brutal. He led me gently but accurately, as a seeingeye dog does with a blind person.

"You've had your lawn sprinkler on? Quite a bit?"

"Well, sure. My grandsons turned it on back in July. I turned the tap off, but not the main valve. It's in the cellar. But there's been just a little trickle coming out of it for the last month."

"Skunks," he stated succinctly. "The water brought up those white grubs and the skunks went after them."

I wanted to give him an argument but I couldn't find a thing to say. If it wouldn't be a rotten pun, I might admit I felt a bit sheepish. Sheep were the only animals I hadn't thought of.

Anyway, the water is turned off and the skunks are off to ravage some other plot. I learned something, an achievement these days. And I have one more mark on the lengthy tally my grandboys must answer to one day.