

The fury of a homeowner with an unplowed street

Hell knows no fury like a homeowner whose street goes unplowed.
After two years of mild weather we here in Michigan must have forgotten that winter means snow and plenty of it.

The cardinal complaint most frequently spouted hereabouts has been the alleged tardiness of work crews in getting to the subdivisions with snowplows.

It makes me chuckle. People want less government interference but more snow removal services. Somehow they don't consider snow removal as interfering with their right to shovel out their streets.

HAVING LIVED almost all of my life in a city that places snow removal on the same pie-in-the-sky list as polishing the fire hydrants, I can dredge up a few occurrences now filed away upstairs that taught me more than any driver's ed course, thanks

Marilyn Fitchett

to unplowed residential streets.
Just about everyone who wasn't born in suburbia knows what becomes of streets that are left to the elements. Two narrow ruts eventually are fashioned out of the snow by the traffic. The ruts are presumed to be of the one-size-fits-all variety, but woe were you if years back you had a compact car. The tires couldn't in their wildest four-ply studded dreams follow the tailored swath of a wide-track Pontiac.

If you owned such a vehicle, you know that one tire drove down the street in a rut while the other banked on a crest of snow about six inches higher. It

all made for a kind of teeter-totter effect.

THIS OFFERED a number of challenges.

There was always the possibility of meeting an oncoming car. If both parties were amenable, the drivers usually would give up one rut each and thereby allow both to assume the teeter-totter position until both cars had safely passed each other by. But as sure as there's snow in Michigan, you always ran into someone who thought he was better than you and would refuse to relinquish a rut.

You had two choices: You could abandon both ruts and hope you didn't get stuck in the piled snow, or you, too, could hold your ground and sit unmoved in the ruts, hoping the other guy thought you meant business. I personally recommend the second treatment. It's especially effective if you squint and

drive a battered, 1955 pickup with twin I-beam bumpers.

THEN THERE were the sidestreet intersections when the east-west ruts merged into the north-south ruts to form a sheet of ice. The safest route was to duck into a well-shoveled drive to avoid a confrontation. Sadly, many a clutch met its demise here.

Long before I learned to drive, I discovered the value of the ruts for another purpose. From where we lived it was quite a hike to the skating rink, and during the school year you could only walk there on the weekends. After the Pontiacs plowed through and the snow in the wide-tracks got packed down and turned to ice, we donned our skates in the evenings and glided up and down the block. This didn't perfect your figure eights, but if you did your cross-overs correctly you could get from rut to rut.

'When he lifts his head, give me a whack at him.'

How secret meetings can get off the track

Pardon me if I feel like a prophet.

When the Michigan Legislature was drafting what is now the Open Meetings Act, I asked the House committee to prohibit any topics from being discussed in secret or else to keep the list as short as possible. Florida's law permits no exceptions.

The reason: Once a closed meeting gets rolling, the members want to move on to other subjects.

That was my theory, and it has turned out to be true in practice.

TAKE THE REDFORD Union Board of Education's little closed session last week to discuss a lawsuit it faces in a sex discrimination case. That's allowed under the Michigan act.

Sitting in the lobby quiet as a mouse, with no piped-in music to fog the air, Redford Observer editor Lynn Orr was able to hear the board go beyond merely consulting its attorneys on a lawsuit, as allowed in the Open Meetings Act. The board (1) made a hard decision ("We already have a majority") and (2) discussed the Open Meetings Act itself.

Supt. Robert Juhnke wondered aloud about what to say to "our little friend Lynn Orr."

His choice of words reveals much about his state of mind. If I were to describe Ms. Orr, I would try words like experienced journalist, editor, graduate of the University of Michigan; maybe mother, homeowner and taxpayer; maybe one-third of a century old.

But not "our little friend." She's tough as nails, as many of us MBAs in three-piece suits have learned the hard way.

THERE IS A second weakness in the Open Meetings Act as it is actually implemented by our local boards and councils.

The law permits certain specified topics to be discussed in secret, but it doesn't require they be discussed in secret.

In practice, most boards automatically go into closed session every time they get the chance. They never ask themselves, "Is this secrecy really necessary?"

The late Arch Vallier, when serving as a Schoolcraft College trustee, used to make the argument for openness. Once when the SC board was about to close its doors to discuss labor negotiations, Vallier said:

"Let's leave the doors open. We're handling public money. Let's let the people and the union and anybody else know how much we have to spend. It's



Tim Richard

the smartest thing we can do — let the people know."

No one argued with Vallier. They just closed the doors anyway.

The Vallier types are rare. Plymouth Township has one in trustee Lee Fidge, who has made a point of walking out of closed sessions when she smelled violations of the Open Meetings Act. She gets ostracized by her fellow public servants for her observance of a law many politicians dislike.

The Lee Fidges of politics are doing the voters a gigantic favor. They deserve encouragement and a kind greeting.

I HAVE ONE thought to offer anyone — reporter, voter or student — who is told by a public official that a board did something in secret "on the advice of our attorney."

Rest assured you are being dealt with dishonestly. The Open Meetings Act is so plainly written that one almost never needs an attorney's interpretation.

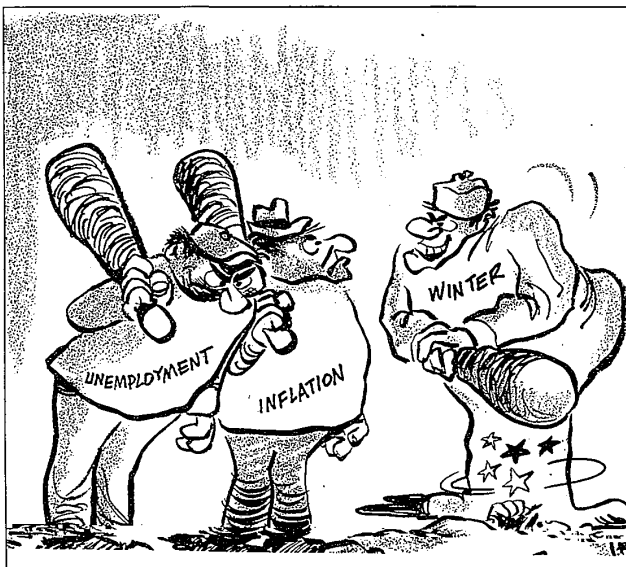
You must understand the nature of an attorney. An attorney is not God. An attorney is not an archangel or a saint. An attorney is not even a dispassionate legal scholar.

An attorney is a hired gun. An attorney tries to find a way to do what the board wants to do.

Rarely do attorneys know much about the Open Meetings Act. Attorneys know contracts and bonds and liability because that's where the money is.

How else could RU's attorneys let the board drift away twice from the narrow strictures of the Open Meetings Act? How could Oakland Community College's attorneys let trustees drift off labor contract A, for which the closed meeting had been called, and onto contract B?

Don't trust an attorney to tell you what's in the Open Meetings Act, and don't trust a public official who says he has consulted an attorney on the Open Meetings Act. Read it for yourself.



Maya plus one — what next?

Since no one can ever top the birthday gift I got last year, I decided it isn't necessary to bother anyone more.

After all, I've had my share of birthdays and who really cares that I was born one cold night in January except my mother and my father? For them, the date is unforgettable. As for others, if I stop bothering, hopefully they may forget.

Besides, after last year, the only celebration necessary is that it's Maya plus one. That's right — Maya plus one.

Last year, the anniversary of my birth came out on a Thursday, so it was business as usual in Eccentric office with the intrusion of off-key renditions of "Happy Birthday" and a high-calorie cake none of us really needed.

Thinking all the fuss was over, I sat down to earn my pay at the trusty video display terminal when the phone rang.

"Congratulations," said a voice unmistakably that of my mother. And I thought how nice of her to call all the way from Florida on daytime rates just to wish me a happy birthday.

But that wasn't what she had on her mind at all.

"CONGRATULATIONS, you have a new granddaughter," she said, with a smile in her voice, and I knew she loved being the one to deliver such happy news.

"Waaaaa!" I shrieked. "But Elaine isn't expecting for two weeks."

A little girl, she repeated.

"Born today? On my birthday?" I managed. And of course, she had been. At first she was our little grape, named Anav, but ultimately, the label was changed to Maya.

It was awesome to think that for all the years to come, I had something so special to share with my second grandchild, and first granddaughter — our birthday.

No way could that birthday gift be topped. I knew even without seeing the newest extension of us all.



Shirlee Iden

And then, I became completely convinced when I met three-week-old Maya.

It was worth every one of those 6,000 miles we traveled to Israel to see her and her big brother and her parents. But then, we met again when she was 8 months old and could scoot around the floor and even walk around holding onto the furniture. Now she's a blond-haired, blue-eyed cutie who babbles and throws kisses.

CERTAINLY every child and grandchild is a gift, but a birthday gift, that's really something.

That's why, thinking about another year passed, a few more gray hairs and creaks in my bones, I declared to Jack: "No birthday. We'll just celebrate Maya plus one."

But with my birthday just days away I decided what I really would like — the only gift that could match or surpass the birth of Maya.

It came to me as we listened to the news and I heard commentator Ted Koppel say it was the 430th day of imprisonment for our 52 American hostages in Iran.

That count of days has become as grating as the Vietnam body counts once were. The hostages have been in bondage longer than Maya has been alive. It's our national agony, the day-by-day feeling of helplessness.

Hints of progress tease us and then more disappointment. Maybe now, that wonderful day of freedom will come for those 52 victims of revolution and fanatists.

I can see it now, the hostages on American soil again on my birthday. It's the ultimate gift, one to share with everyone. And right now, it's the only thing I need.

2 beloved high-rises

Sitting at the kitchen window the other afternoon drinking in the beauty of the wind-driven snow that covered his long backyard with a 10-inch blanket, The Stroller suddenly realized that part of the beauty was four high-rise apartments.

No, they were not the kind erected by man. There was no stone or concrete. Neither were there any driveways or elevators. They were four huge evergreen trees that the birds had come to make their home for the winter.

In all the years The Stroller has lived in what was once termed the wide open spaces, he never had paid much attention to the birds. He was more concerned with getting the snow removed from the driveway.

But the other afternoon it was different. It was the first time he ever had noticed that the birds had made the evergreens their home and these feathered families lived in separate rows of branches from the ground to the top that was more than 30 feet high.

Oh, in other years he had noticed a few cardinals and once in awhile there were what he was told were "snow" birds. And at times there were bluejays and sparrows. Evidently they were the pioneers of the families that now have taken over the four trees that have had an unusual background in the Edgar plot of ground.
The largest of these trees — and the



the stroller

W.W. Edgar

one now housing all sorts of tenants — is the most interesting.

Away back in 1938 when The Stroller and his helpmate moved to "the country," he decided to become his own landscape architect. The first thing he bought was an evergreen tree and planted it at the corner of the house. It looked just dandy. But as the years moved along the tree grew higher and gradually reached the rain spouts. It was now in the way. So it was decided to move it.

Being a neophyte at such things, he and his helpmate lifted the tree and didn't take any earth with it. When we got it on the wheelbarrow, the helper asked, "Where do you want it?" At that very moment the tree slid from the barrow and The Stroller said, "I guess the Man up there wants it here." And so it was planted at that spot.

No one realized that it was due to become a bird's high-rise apartment. But it is now more than 30 feet high with families on every floor. And it is

now only one of the four that were planted in the same haphazard fashion. But what beauties they are now with each branch heavy laden with snow. They add to the picture that no artist could paint.

One of the other "apartments" came about in a strange way. While looking over evergreens at the nursery one afternoon, The Stroller noticed one with a bent trunk.

"I'll give it to you," the nurseryman said, "if you want to plant it." The Stroller accepted. Now that awkward looking tree, too, has grown to great height and is the pride of the backyard.

The curve in the trunk has given the birds what can be termed a porch — and they make the most of it — looking down on the pheasants, rabbits and squirrels as they pass by.

Yes, the snow may be bothersome to some folks, but it made possible four high-rise apartments in his backyard and The Stroller is now really enjoying the heavy snow for the first time.