

Metro/Michigan

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ROD SANFORD
Ray Evert is the park care-
taker in Eagle.



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At right, 83-year-old Hiram Hazen picks raspberries on his Eagle farm; above, mail carrier Vicki Hunter and postmaster June Jackson stand at the village post office.



Eagle

The village celebrates survival — and revival

By MIKE HUGHES
Lansing State Journal

EAGLE — Life used to press in on all sides of Hiram Hazen.

In the back of his farm, the train whizzed by. "The railroad was right there, just over the fence," he said from his raspberry patch. "Boy, it was loud."

In the front, U.S. 16 zoomed. And across the street was the Eagle school.

That's where Hazen, now 83, studied. It's where his kids went, where he figured his grandkids and great-grandkids would go. "It was so close that I could wait for the bell to start ringing and still get there on time."

This was a rural life surrounded by movement. It would change

nearby. Suddenly, cars didn't have much reason to drive through Eagle.

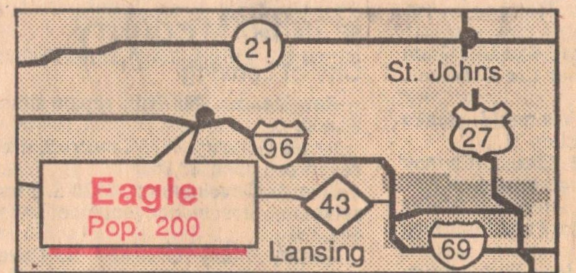
"We had trouble sleeping," recalls Bob Feldpausch, who lives alongside old 16, "until we got used to the quiet."

The four gas stations closed. Some of the stores closed and the grain elevator was abandoned. The school closed, with kids being bused to Portland; two years ago, the train stopped running.

In its fervor to connect large cities, I-96 had gone a step further: It had gulped up the Eagle fairgrounds, home of the area's one big celebration.

"The new road finally killed the village," one old-timer said back in 1968.

Nineteen years later, Dale Volk, 77, was echoing the view: "That (interstate) was devastating for the



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Our Towns: Eagle

- **History:** Settlers arrived in 1834, with first township meeting in 1841.
- **Events:** Eagle Fair Days continue through Sunday at the fairgrounds.
- **Quotable:** "Vandalism is nil. We had some once, but we found out who it was. Their parents had them come down here and do some work." — Fred Catlin, at the fair.

businesses.”

But as Volk was talking, he was fixing up the new version of the Eagle fairgrounds. The people of Eagle were building and enthusing, two things they do often and well.

“There are a lot of places where a lot of people will pull together,” said Fred Catlin. “But I think there are more here than anywhere else.”

This year, they’ve built a grandstand and a senior-citizen room. They’ve also cleared a grassy new stretch for parking.

“We pulled all the trees out,” Catlin says. “Then we lined up side-by-side and walked through the whole thing, pulling out weeds and picking up rocks.”

That’s important for this weekend’s Eagle Fair Days, because the masses pour in. At 1 p.m. today, the Budweiser Clydesdales will lead the parade. Throughout today and Sunday, people will catch carnival rides and softball games and a chicken barbecue and other small-town wonders.

Certainly, Eagle hasn’t bounced back to its old days, when it even had general stores and hardware stores and more. “There was a hotel down there,” says Paul Edgecomb, 73. “They’d have dances, bands, everything.”

This is a town whose 200 residents — many of them big-city commuters — have to drive elsewhere to do most of their shopping. But a decade ago, they had to drive to a slippery-slide or a merry-go-round.

Now that’s changed. “Look at all the ballfields we’ve built,” Volk said. “Look at the playgrounds. We’ve got tennis courts, picnic tables.”

And there are people using them. Ray Evert, 70, spends his

winters in Florida and the rest of the year in a trailer, tending and watching the park. “It’s bein’ used all the time. They have a lot of reunions and receptions.”

This adds up to a semi-comeback for a town that once seemed to be slipping peacefully away.

Back in 1834, Anthony Niles and Stephen Groger took their families from Troy, New York. They floated down the Looking Glass River, before picking spots for their farms. The Grogers would have the first white baby born in Clinton County; the Niles would hold Eagle’s first township meeting, in 1841.

Remarkably, most people in Eagle say they don’t know where the name comes from and they’ve never really wondered. The official view is that it was named after Eagle Falls, N.Y.

Whatever the reason, the village developed in 1873, when George McCrumb donated 20 acres of land (along U.S. 16 and Westphalia Road) and built the railroad depot. The houses and businesses followed; so did the post-interstate slide.

And the revival came with an injection of new optimism.

Fred Catlin, 46, had grown up on an Eagle farm, but drifted off. He spent 16 years as a Clinton County sheriff’s deputy, not counting a couple stabs at being a private eye.

But cop work lacked excitement, especially in an area short on crime. (“In that whole time, there might have been two or three murders I worked on.”) He bought a tavern and added a restaurant; the Eagle Inn was born.

“It worked real well right from the start,” Catlin said. “We’re the only restaurant around here and we get a lot of business. There are

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— Fred Catlin

times when this place is full.”

But Catlin grants that restauring doesn’t hold his attention, either. He began talking with others about reviving the Eagle fair.

The idea pleased the tiny business community. There was Herman Terkeurst, a Grand Rapids transplant who started (and later sold) Herm’s Freezer Meats. There was Duane Murphy of the now-defunct Murphy’s Tavern, Don Edgecomb of the local party store, and John Cooper, a general Eagle enthusiast.

The fest was launched in 1970 in Eagle’s tiny downtown. Three years later, the old fair board retrieved its treasury (about \$17,000) and bought a 22-acre parcel behind the inn.

Ever since, the place has been busy. Now it has exhibit buildings, an office, two ballfields, two playgrounds, tennis courts and more. “There’s no tax money involved,” Catlin said proudly. “It’s all volunteer work and the profits from the fair.”

During the summer, there’s a 10-team softball league with games three nights a week. During the winter, there are snowmobile races. And throughout the year, Eagle manages to have a centerpoint.

None of its homes are new — “I don’t think we’ve had a new house in 10 years,” guesses postmaster

June Jackson — but most are neat and suburban. There are 51 in all, most in a suburban-style squares just off the main drag.

Drive through and you’ll see several swimming pools, a couple satellite dishes and signs that families are making their money elsewhere. “People can buy a house for \$30,000 or \$35,000 and really fix it up,” said Feldpausch.

Postal worker Vicki Hunter moved here almost by accident. “I was nine months pregnant and we needed a place we could afford, near my husband’s work.”

That was 19 years ago and now she talks cheerfully about the village’s quiet joys. Her children, 19 and 15, don’t always agree, of course. “I tell them it was a very good place for them when they were young.”

Her life — with home and work tucked side-by-side — is typical of Eagle. Fred Catlin’s ex-wife still lives in a big house next to the inn and the park, with their two younger children. Their 18-year-old son, Ron, soups up a pick-up truck in a former auto garage across the street.

And Hiram Hazen keeps at work on the farm, just as his family always has.

Hiram Snyder, his maternal grandfather, bought the place for \$400 in 1855. Hazen officially took over in 1939, amid despair. “My God, the way things were in the Depression. I sold oats for 10-15 cents a bushel.”

He has survived with dignity. At 83, he’s a straight, solid man who works the raspberry patch and grows corn for a roadside stand.

“For the last 10 years, I’ve sold sweetcorn here. This year was my best one in the 10 years . . . You won’t get me to move to the big city; I’m too busy here.”



Fred Catlin grew up in Eagle, spent 16 years as a sheriff's deputy and now owns the Eagle Inn.