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A hot Iowa day, nothing generates heat like the sun beating down on moist rich soil. I jumped into my aunt’s car, suitcase packed, ready for adventure. We drove through the sun scorching day, through the Iowa cornfields, along the Rock River in Illinois, looking at Chief Black Hawk high on a bluff above the river, into the more gentle Wisconsin landscape with restaurants and taverns wherever highways crossed. I was about ten years old. My aunt and I stopped in Milwaukee to visit friends. Two days later we boarded the Milwaukee Clipper. What adventure for an Iowa boy whose longest boat ride on open water was the Staten Island Ferry when he was six. I remember the band playing on deck, watching the wake (something I had never seen before), and observing the quantities of Schlitz beer consumed by the passengers. Coming from a household where my grandmother, who lived with us, faithfully put her money into a Women’s Christian Temperance Union box with the label “a penny a day to keep liquor away,” this was my introduction into life on the fast track.

Our destination, of course, Muskegon. This trip, my summer holiday, was to Muskegon. This was the city to which we were headed and from which we would return. My aunt’s stepmother and sister lived in Muskegon. My prominent memory was the beach, a playground for a ten-year-old unlike anything my Iowa
environment had provided. In my boyhood, my Muskegon vacation equated with those we spent visiting New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and of course, Des Moines, where we often spent the day. It was one of the five or six cities of my conscious experience, and for that reason, like a Pavlovian subject, mention of your city for more than fifty years elicits from me a pleasant response.

Our family moved to Holland, Michigan in 1945. In those high school days, Muskegon was mostly highly charged athletic contests against the Tigers of Muskegon Heights and the Big Red Machine, Muskegon High. What powerhouses those two were. In my four years at Holland High, the highest achievement in inter school rivalry was a win in football over Muskegon 13 to 7. The Tigers always devoured us.

I rediscovered Muskegon for myself in 1969. I had been making my way in life through graduate school in New Jersey, teaching in Ohio, and administering a college in the same Iowa town where my first trek to Muskegon originated twenty-sever years earlier. Sylvia and Dick Kaufman had a party for Nancy and me, introducing us to Muskegon loyalists, and some of you were there. My positive psychic feelings for Muskegon were reinforced. I came frequently doing the business of a recently appointed President of Grand Valley State College; making speeches, calling on the Chronicle staff, enjoying newly developing friendships, and, of course, asking for money. I met Mr. Frauenthal. At the time I knew he was
important, but I didn’t know how important he was going to be in Muskegon County’s continuing life, really in its renaissance. We can see him now from 30 years of perspective. I remember he talked to me that day about the Foundation and the future of Muskegon. He was friendly and encouraging to me, but he knew where he wanted to leave his fortune. He didn’t live long after I first met him, but his deeds are living still.

One day before I returned to the Allendale campus, I walked from the parking lot to the Muskegon Museum of Art. I like an art fix once in awhile, and I had never visited your collection. I walked up the stairs into the main gallery and there, the first to catch my attention, was the Curry - the tornado funnel, and the farm family with worried looks hurrying to the shelter. “So this is where that painting is,” I said to myself “not New York, Chicago, or Kansas City.” The painting of my boyhood, the painting in the book of American art on my parent’s coffee table, the painting that I looked at over and over, certainly one of the works of art that gave art meaning for me at an early age. Here it is in Muskegon. And then my eye went to the Hopper. I paused at the Rodin and on and on and on. I was hooked. I was pleased. Good feelings welled up inside. It is a day I will remember.

This story, my story about Muskegon, I tell you because tonight is about people’s stories of their community and what they do because of those stories. You have been so kind to my causes and me here and elsewhere that I don’t feel like an
outsider. But I am not a Muskegon County resident. Most of you have deeper roots. Many of you have life-long stories lived out here. You have made your livelihood here. You have raised families here. Some have found new life-changing opportunities here. Some have watched decline, suffered frustration, determined to set a new agenda, and have done it.

The Muskegon Community Foundation is the place where people who have their life’s story or part of it in Muskegon can come together and make the ongoing story of the county a happier rather than sadder one. While doing that, the life story of each donor is continued through the flow of dollars into the community. If enough life stories in the community carry with them positive experiences and the loyalty and affection that emanate from them, the money to carry life forward positively into the next generation of Muskegon County will come.

There is nothing more encouraging to a false sense of importance than to be driven in an official car. I have had that experience twice – once with Ambassador Peter Secchia in Rome. It was a cavalcade actually and necessary to protect the Ambassador from terrorists. The second was a ride from the American Embassy in Paris to the Quay d’Orsy, the French Foreign Ministry, where I was to be given a lesson on the United States’ most special characteristic by the Deputy Foreign Minister. As one of twelve commissioners appointed to ascertain the origins of American Foreign Policy (I was appointed by Gerald Ford), I was visiting three
European capitals. After we had worked through our Foreign Policy agenda, the Deputy Foreign Minister said to me, “You know, America’s greatest distinguishing characteristic is the willingness of the people to improve society by giving their money to causes in which they believe. No other nation has that tradition. It is uniquely American. And if I had to point to one element in your national life that contributes to making the United States the strongest nation in the world, it would be giving personally and through Foundations.” That was a new viewpoint for me. As a college President, I knew all about the importance of giving for the perpetuation of our institutions, but I had not thought about it as the major difference between our country and the world.

Perhaps it has its origins in the fact that our churches were not state or land supported. If the devout wanted a place of worship and a person to lead them, they had to pay for them. Maybe the vast frontier populated by native Americans contributed. Protection and survival by European stock required a “do it yourself attitude and capacity.” The Government, its troops, and money, were usually a long way off.

The English essayist Matthew Arnold had this to say, “First and foremost of the necessary means towards man’s civilization we must name expansion. The need of expansion is as genuine an instinct in man as it is in a plant for the light or the need in man himself for going upright. The love of liberty is simply the instinct
in man for expansion.” Fascinating thought! If true, that would account in part for the using of our personal resources, given by individuals and corporations to make things happen. A new civilization is carved out of a frontier. A decline in a community is always met by the desire to resurrect; somewhere there is growth or the seeds of growth even amidst contraction and deflation. These are what Matthew Arnold is talking about.

We as a people have always looked for a way to build and renew. The first time the idea of a Community Foundation flitted across the mental screen for the purpose of using resources, especially bequests for community purposes, came early in the century in Cleveland, Ohio. Fredrick Harris Goff, President of the Cleveland Trust Company, came up with the idea and launched the Cleveland Foundation on January 2, 1914. Earlier Goff had been one of John D. Rockefeller’s lawyers, and a writer of wills. He watched a lot of money used poorly after the death of those who possessed it. Among his notes is this telling passage: “The grip of the dead hand shall be shaken off absolutely and finally; in other words, that there shall always be a living and reasonable owner of property, to manage it according to the wants of mankind.”

Eighty-four years after Goff made his move to bring resources through a public community foundation to build Cleveland; we are here in Muskegon doing the same thing. This is a bold foundation. I won’t list the accomplishments. You all
know them. But few community foundations have courageously led public initiatives like this one. Your leadership is unsurpassed and your commitment to the people of the county all embracing.

What could possibly go wrong? Let’s think on it. Here is a truism. “People with means move about.” Here is another one. “Most people who work in cold climes retire to warmer ones.” Here is a third. “Interested, interesting, involved people remain that way wherever they are.” Good works abound in Florida and Arizona. You should be able to say “a good work there is a good work anywhere.” That may be God’s perspective, but it’s only a theory in Muskegon.

In the cycle of life and death, Muskegon appears like the butterfly shaking off the cocoon. Some things have died here and others are coming to life. The Foundation is needed to create and sustain life. It needs even the wanderers. It needs loyalty that lasts a lifetime. The Muskegon Theatre and the Frauenthal Center are physical symbols of what has been accomplished. The future has even more in store if even those who leave periodically will make a Mecca-like pilgrimage and lay their gifts at the front door of the Muskegon Foundation. More than good will is necessary. The Foundation doesn’t need the kind of person Oliver Goldsmith described in his “Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog.”
"A kind and gentle heart he had,
To comfort friends and foes;
The naked every day he clad,
When he put on his clothes"

My life’s story about Muskegon continues. Since that day my life here was connected from boyhood to adulthood, standing before the Curry. I have visited the museum often and worked for Muskegon and Grand Valley amongst you. The Higher Education Center at Community College, the legislators from this area, and Making Waves in Muskegon that brought us the research vessel, The William Jackson all have been part of my beat. What I have observed is a better than usual working arrangement amongst the county, the city, private enterprise, and the Foundation. If you aren’t careful you will become an example for other parts of the state. “Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example,” declared Mark Twain. It was said by Walt Whitman, however, that they are “the greatest who contribute the greatest original practical example.” What’s happening here is practical. The working arrangements are right and can lead to stirring developments. I know one of your interests is a changed lakeshore, changed for the 21st century. The life and institution I represent can play a part. Fulfillment for me will be an expanded water resources program here. It can
provide a Muskegon link for me stretching from 1941 to 2000 – from boyhood to retirement. How will your story and Muskegon ultimately connect?

“Lives of great people all remind us,

We can make our lives sublime

And, departing leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The Muskegon Foundation specializes in the preservation of footprints. Muskegon can have it all. Remember what the philosopher Mae West said, “Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.”