

## THE BIRDS AND THE BEASTS WERE THERE July 11, 2012

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

I am often asked how we ended up in the small town of Big Rapids, Michigan, the only city of that name in the US. Sometimes I ask myself the same question. After all, I was raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a haven of sophistication and intelligence, not to mention people of all races, creeds, and religions. Big Rapids, meanwhile, is a largely Republican stronghold embedded in something similar to the Bible belt. What is a very liberal Democrat, Buddhist family doing here? And I am an astrologer, to boot. Actually, the answer is pretty simple: kids. We moved here to raise our kids. Growing up in Ann Arbor, I had no idea that all towns across the country were not just like Ann Arbor. I just assumed they were. Of course they are not. Ann Arbor is a very rare bird indeed, but I didn't know that then.

When Margaret and I began having children, which was in the early 1970s, I had kind of worn out any novelty that Ann Arbor might have held for me, having been there almost all my life. When you add kids to the mix and the fact that it never occurred to us to have babysitters, our points of contact with the city dwindled. We never went anywhere without our kids, and kids were not always that welcome, especially in the singles crowd from which we emerged. I believe we did not have a babysitter for twenty-one-years. And it was not distrust of other people. There was just nothing we had to do that was so important that we would leave the kids. And then there is the fact that less and less of Ann Arbor appealed (or was of any use) to us, not the restaurants, the bars, the whole singles atmosphere of the town, thanks to all the students and the University of Michigan. In the end, when we looked at how little of the town we actually needed or made use of, we knew we could live anywhere. Kids and work changed our lives.

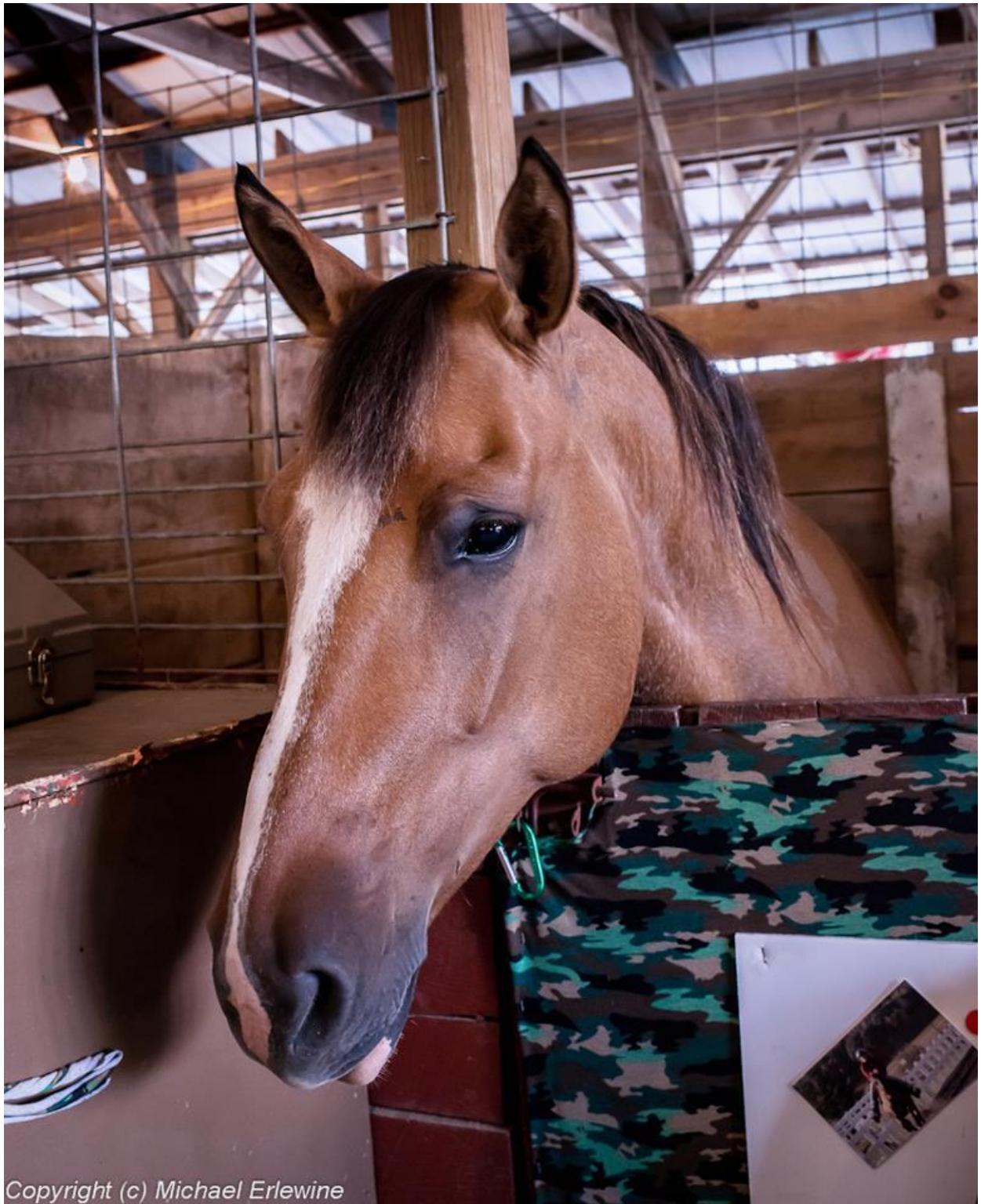
Perhaps the overarching reason for getting out of town was the memory both Margaret and I had of growing up in a place where kids could walk downtown unaccompanied and go to the movies or get a milkshake. Ann Arbor, for all its charm, was no longer a town that you would just turn your kids loose in. It used to be, but by the early 1970s, it had gotten a little too big and a little too unpredictable. And I already told you that we liked to be with our kids. Big Rapids is a small Michigan town located between Grand Rapids and Cadillac, about a three-hour drive north-west of Ann Arbor. At the time, my parents lived there and my dad was the comptroller for Ferris State College (now a university), where career training was the focus. I never grew up in Big Rapids. My parents moved there after I had left home, which was when I was about eighteen. But it was small, safe, and I already had some extended family there. So in 1980, on what I am told was the coldest day of the year (March 1st), we moved (with our two kids and three pickup trucks full of stuff) to Big Rapids, Michigan. And we bought a house. I never thought I would be able own a house, but the astrology software business was picking up and the house was only \$30,000, which seemed to us like a fortune back then, so we just did it.

We still live in that same house today, but over the years we have added on to it, not to mention buying the house next door as a place for our dharma and astrology center. What we essentially have is a small compound, where we live and work. We have never felt part of the social scene here in Big Rapids, and don't share the politics or the religion of the town. However we like the people, and just live here quietly. And our kids grew up in a safe environment, one where they could freely range about town, walk to school, ride their bikes, and enjoy all of the thrills of a small-town life that I did as a kid. It is almost like a time warp back to an earlier decade, which is just fine by me. Fear is not something kids need a whole lot of. We live two blocks from Mitchell Creek and Clay Cliff Park, and two blocks from vast meadows and woods. As a naturalist, our

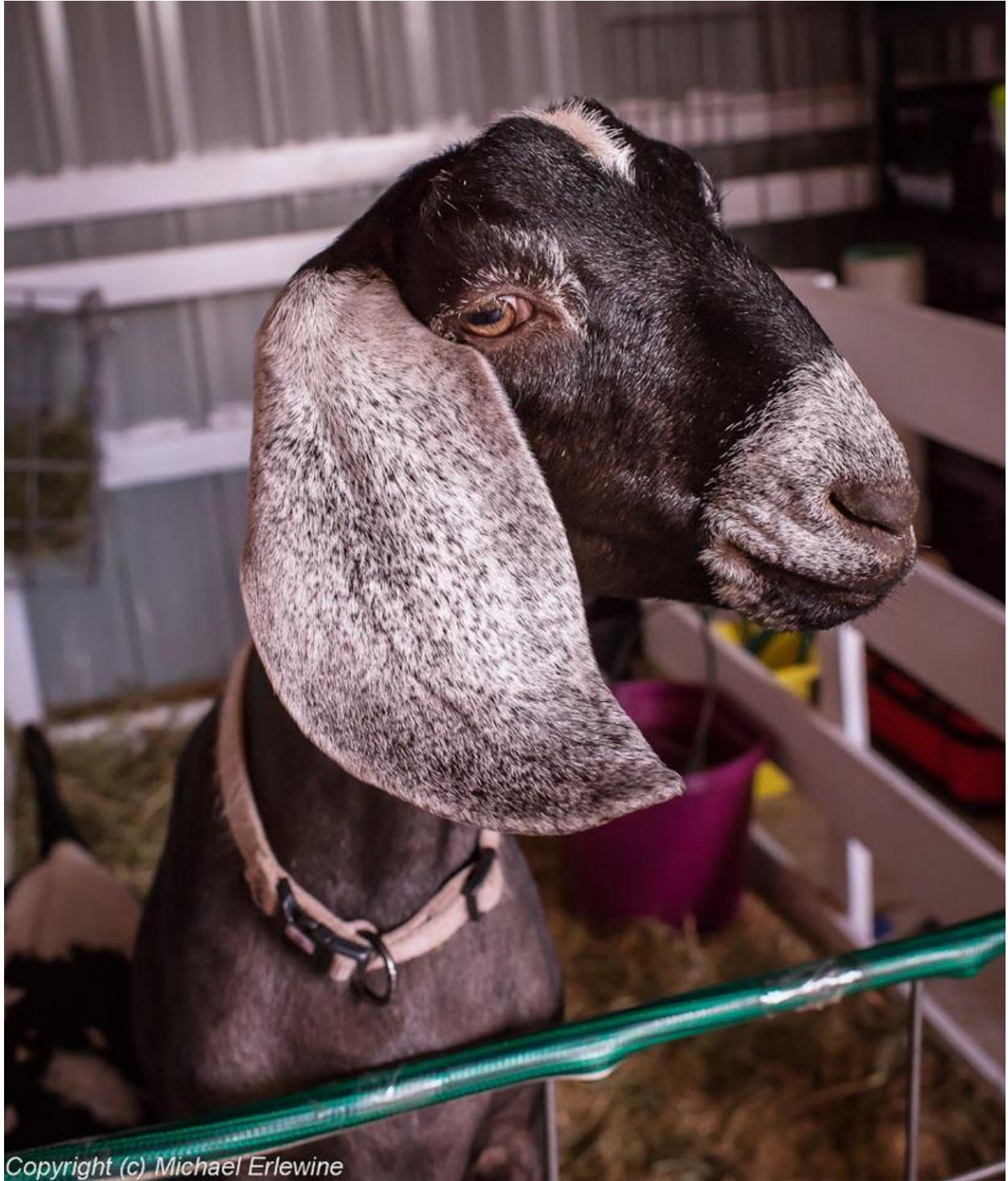
kids were raised around and spent plenty of time in nature. Margaret and I were board members of Wildlife Rescue, and our backyard was filled with stainless-steel cages that contained about every kind of bird and mammal you could imagine. We nursed injured animals to health and released them. It was all good. In just a few minutes I am heading out to visit our local county fair and the birds and the beast will be there. I will take some photos and will post them here. [Photos taken by me at the Mecosta County Fair]



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