

The Only Eaton Rapids on Earth



Lawrence P. Nolan

Why Eaton Rapids? Did you grow up in Eaton Rapids? Oh yeah, Eaton Rapids—isn't that up there near Big Rapids? Did you say Grand Rapids? Where is Eaton Rapids? These are just a few of the most common questions I am asked when I tell people that my office is in Eaton Rapids.

Over the past 41 years, Eaton Rapids has been home to my law practice. My office sits on Main Street in the center of this beautiful small town of approximately 4,500 people on the west bank of the incredible Grand River that meanders over 265 miles from Jackson to Grand Haven before coming to rest in Lake Michigan.

First, you should understand that I love Michigan. I was born in Detroit, grew up in Farmington, and love the ever-changing seasons of the Midwest.

I'm a lifetime fan of the Detroit Red Wings, Lions, Tigers, and Pistons. Long ago, I learned that Detroit sports fans love any team called "Detroit." It's in your blood—a sports love affair like no other.

Certainly, there is the great divide between being a Spartan or a Wolverine. You're either Green and White or Blue and Gold in these parts. Unless, of course, you're a

Western Michigan Bronco, in which case you can sidestep the intense rivalry by saying that the Brown and Gold are the only undefeated NCAA Division I college football team in the state, and one of only two in the nation. Christmas has certainly come early for the Bronco Nation. Row the Boat!

For years, driving into Eaton Rapids at the northernmost city limits I was reminded daily that it's "The Only Eaton Rapids on

I have the most beautiful location in the world to practice law.

Earth." The sign that greeted travelers heading south on M-99 was replaced a few years ago. I am uncertain if the powers that be removed the sign or whether there is now another Eaton Rapids in the world.

Upon opening my office on July 1, 1976, I began a legal journey that would take me places I could have never envisioned. I became immersed in the Eaton Rapids community. I joined Kiwanis, Rotary, and St. Peter's Catholic Church. I made employment connections and was retained to do legal work for Eaton Federal Savings and Loan and Michigan Packaging Company. I was chosen as attorney for Onondaga and Eaton Rapids townships. I helped our local hospital with fundraising and contributed to fundraising projects for its foundation.

The town was well known for a number of privately held corporations that I later dis-

covered were related to the foundation and core of this unique community.

Horner Woolen Mills produced woolen blankets for the U.S. military in both World Wars. They also produced the yarn used in all major league baseballs.

Miller Dairies produced milk and ice cream that were sold locally but distributed statewide. People would rave about Miller's ice cream and told stories of Sunday afternoon drives with their families just to buy ice cream at Miller's Dairy store. I later learned that one of the reasons people would come from miles around was because Miller's reportedly was well known for having the highest butterfat content of any ice cream made in the Midwest.

The VFW National Home for Children is located just a short distance from downtown.

The old Reuter mansion lies just a few miles north of the town and is now a wonderful bed and breakfast and wedding destination known as the English Inn. If you have never been there for lunch or dinner, make sure you put it on your must-do list.

Then there are the annual Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Homecoming, and Santa parades; the Christmas lights; chicken barbecues; and, more recently, the huge Airstream trailer rally called Urban Air. A hundred or more trailers come to this small community and camp overnight on both sides of the street to help facilitate the most unique Airstream rally in the country.

A spontaneous Wednesday night hot-rod show sprung up out of nowhere. Throughout the summer, people come from all over to see the wall-to-wall lineup of classic cars on both sides of the street. The classic cars start rolling in, taking every available parking spot, around 5 p.m. every Wednesday. There are no organizers, no rules, no trophies, and no judges or awards. Near sunset, the cars leave as loudly as they came, with the understanding that the drivers will

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surely be back the following week to display their muscle machines and talk about the cars' histories, horsepower, years of restoration, and days gone by.

In any case, I have had the pleasure of daily taking the road less traveled in my career. When I come into Eaton Rapids in the morning, I drive from Okemos where I live with my wife, Laurel, and where we raised our children, Bridget and Patrick. The majority of the morning traffic consists of people heading to their jobs in Lansing in the opposite direction. When I return home in the evening, the heavy traffic is always coming out of Lansing while I encounter light traffic going back to Okemos.

I have been asked many times how I came to start a law practice in Eaton Rapids if I didn't grow up there. The answer is simple. As many of my colleagues know, I was accepted to the first class of Thomas M. Cooley Law School when it opened its doors to a small group of evening students in January 1973. The law school was the brainchild of Michigan Supreme Court Justice Thomas Emmett Brennan and his wife, Polly. It would certainly never have happened had Polly not given Tom the green light and her seal of approval to proceed with this venture. Not only did Polly give her blessing, she rolled up her sleeves and, along with Denise Phillips and Mary Lynn Gallagher, personally registered one student after another to form what was later to be known as the "Cooley Class." For that class and classes many years after, the trio registered students without drawing a paycheck.

Most of my classmates and I graduated in three years, taking classes year round and working day jobs from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. We graduated in January 1976, and one month later, were the first Cooley class to take the Michigan bar exam. We received our results in May. Our class bar exam passage rate remains one of the highest in Cooley history.

Only a few of my classmates failed to pass the bar exam. One worked as a clerk for an attorney in Eaton Rapids named Milt Zentmyer, who had a small solo practice on Main Street for approximately 15 years. Zentmyer had purchased the practice from Richard Robinson, who was a solo practitioner for approximately 20 years before being elected to the Eaton County Circuit Court bench. Zentmyer was closing his practice

to move with his wife to Flagstaff, Arizona, where they had both accepted professorships at Northern Arizona State University.

I discovered the practice was being sold when I saw an ad in the *Bar Journal* listing law books and office furniture for sale. After looking at the library and furniture, I found out that Zentmyer intended to sell his entire law practice to my classmate who had clerked for him. My classmate, however, had failed the bar exam, couldn't go through with the deal he had made, and was planning to go in a completely different direction and was moving up north with his wife and children.

I met with my classmate to make sure he didn't wish to pursue a career in the law in Eaton Rapids before talking to the attorney who was selling his practice. I wanted to confirm I had his approval to purchase the practice.

Often, people remark that I must have had a lot of guts to go straight from law school into private practice on my own. I like to think that as well. The truth of the matter, however, is that a Cooley Law School graduate was an untested commodity. Did a Cooley Law School graduate receive an education that would enable him or her to succeed in the real world of law? No one was willing to take a chance on the first graduating class.

So yes, it was up to our class and the subsequent classes in those early years to prove that we had what it took to contribute to society's greatest profession.

Purchasing my own office was, in reality, a lifelong dream. Ever since, I have been personally and professionally rewarded by being a practicing trial lawyer.

I love practicing in Eaton Rapids. The town is filled with great people, many of whom have become lifelong friends, not just clients. I have a deep sense of pride in what I have done over 41 years in helping hundreds, if not thousands, of people seek and obtain justice through our courts in this great state.

I could have gone anywhere, but why should I? I have the most beautiful location in the world to practice law in "The Only Eaton Rapids on Earth."

As Paul Harvey used to say, "And now you know the rest of the story." ■

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