

Camden, Michigan Resembles a New Faded Bandana on Willy Nelson

Jerry Pattengale (published with Paxton Media ©)

The holiday trappings in Camden, Michigan are like placing a new faded bandana on Willy Nelson, or handing Marty Feldman the latest NASCAR hat—it is what it is, and there's something special about it. It's charming in a *Mail Pouch Tobacco* barn sort of way. The mismatched brick buildings frame a downtown that was never pretty but somehow appropriate. A curious thing this city is, a collection of architectural afterthoughts.

I asked the 20-something waitress “Do you have wireless?” and she said, “What do you mean?” I realized I was in a sort of Smallville. When I asked Yvonne and Brent, the kind owners of Itschner's Market, what townfolk enjoyed she instantly replied, “We like boring.” Brent, a veteran *Skoal* man himself, fully loaded, took a break from the meat counter to chat and commented on yesterday's big parade, “. . . but it only lasted five minutes.” Camden, Michigan marches to the beat of its own drum—and judging by the crowd of pocket-protector farmers and mechanics enjoying coffee from vintage thick Heartland Café mugs, it's more like an oil drum than any recognized social norm. On July 5th the 17 flags and tattered hand-painted patriotic trash can accented the moment, though somewhat dulled by the Christmas wreaths still hanging on second story single-pane apartment windows above a nameless flea market storefront.

If you visit Camden you can sit at the South Michigan Bank and Trust facing due south and get free internet if you place your laptop on the dash. You also get a front view of historical questions. The northeast end of town center stares you in the face, along with a few baha machines parked near the café next to a rental's stairs tucked above the adjacent Village Hall with ugly white siding missing a few critical pieces.

Perhaps the most curious site is “Rainbow Gifts,” a store on the west side of this wide “Rte. 49” main street (a few miles north of rte. 120) with mismatched concrete and raised sidewalks reminiscent of frontier days. The store's window painted slogans, include “See your Aura: Discover the Rainbow Within.” I'm not sure what that means, or what kind of pot would be waiting at the rainbow's end, especially with dime-store-type trinkets filling the shelves behind another huge painted outline of a human body next to a illustrated horseshoe magnet with the promise— “Real Time bio feedback tool.” Nothing about the ads register, but in case something should go awry I suppose I could step next door to the “Attorney at Law: Robert P. Tiplady.”

Another curious store posts “The Empowerment Line” in glittery letters and a motto, “County Concepts where ideas are grown.” I'm beginning to wonder what else is grown around here.

A few classy stores dot the landscape, such as, “The Farms, Amish & Country Furniture and Furnishings” and “The Clubhouse” which the gregarious Tillers at nearby Lake Diane informed me has great burgers. But once again your eyes are taken to a bizarre

cryptic storefront with misaligned stick-on letters spelling “Platinum, Inc. Body Art.” I had noticed on the north end of town an overgrown disheveled property sporting the same name, only with large-lettered “TATTOOS” in the window. Something seemed disconnected, a tattoo parlor in a town absent of any sense of aesthetics. The second trashcan is a darker blue, like a throwaway Ford Galaxy paint, and besides contrasting with its Uncle Sam partner is certainly hurts the eyes parked next to the lone faded lime green bench. I suppose a bong and a few days at Woodstock might bring some sense of artistic understanding.

Unlike the little Midwestern boroughs like Gas City and Sweetser, there’s no fancy Carnegie Library here, just the hand-painted signs on the storefront Camden Library, next to a “Library Book Return” box, yet another shade of blue with six inches of rust at its base. The recent animal mural presents somewhat of a distraction, but then you see an odd door, “108 Main” next to a window into what resembles a *Sanford and Son* gathering of collectibles.

And perhaps the kicker is another sun-bleached handmade sign, likely from someone not visiting the library’s grammatical section, “Building for sale. 2 apartment’s and EMPTY storefront.” The “EMPTY” was obviously added later, and the sad part is that the now defunct “Tracy’s Main Street Hair Salon” boasts one the towns classiest signs—but perhaps she somehow missed the market of John Deere hairdos (just to the right of the post office and not pictured on the town’s website: <http://www.infomi.com/city/camden/>, taken from the town’s southeastern end).

I stood back and looked anew at all the brick types, from the lighter “Frontier” company and the yellow “Camden Fire & Rescue” building, to the variations of dark, shiny, dull, and those untucked and neatly appointed, apparently a nineteenth-century hodgepodge now sharing space with 1960s mismatched vinyl siding, from linear green barn sheets to horizontal generic. Camden resembles the architectural gathering found in Pittsburgh, but only different. Instead of variant masterpieces, cathedrals and bridges from the immigrants, we are left with add-ons, contrasts and questions.

But before you leave this reflection and drive mentally from Camden you should know something else—it’s my second visit. Something about the nice folks at Heartland where stalwart tables are clean and four bucks buys five pounds of breakfast and where the quiet folks at Itschners deliver food to shut-ins. Where Pastor Diane helps the United Methodist Church live out its “beacon of hope” mantra. Camden is the gathering place of survivors, where median household income is only \$33,800 and house prices are on the rise—averaging \$78,000, up from \$60,800 in 2000. Camden’s disregard for design gives the place mental memory for us visitors but living meaning for residents. Not every town can say it was named by drawing from a hat, and if you’re camping in the area and can’t seem to find the café, just look for the air conditioner sticking out of the front window.