**Showcasing the DNR: A photography moment, outside the door, at the side of the road**

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

*“Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing,” – Pete Seeger*

Rolling through the bucolic countryside on some forgotten copper-claim byway, I glanced over my shoulder as I crested a small hill.

When I saw what I saw I pulled the car into the crunching gravel at the side of the road. I turned around and headed back, parking on the shoulder.

Just beyond a shallow ditch was a house set back off the road. There was an old, leafless apple tree to the side of the front yard. The gnarled, gray fingers and upturned arms of this old matriarch reached wide to protect a sublime treasure lying beneath.

Around the sides of a big, knobby tractor tire were dozens and dozens of blooming crocuses, white, purple and even a handful colored yellow, bright and bold like buttercups. I had never seen so many crocuses in one place – it was like a sea of purple and white, moving slowly with bursts of wind that blew across the brown grass of the yard.

I wanted to take some close-up photographs of this wonderful spray of heaven. I turned to approach the house to knock on the door to ask permission. When I did, I stood shocked to see that not only was no one at home, but the house was dark, broken and abandoned.

The house was a green, metal, put-together kind of structure with white pines standing tall in a row behind. An old car was left in the back. Some animal had chewed through the screens that covered the doors. The concrete foundation had big holes in it. The roof line was busted uneven, and the steps were gone from under a sliding glass door that sat about midway down the length of the house.

No sidewalk, pathway or trail through the grass was discernable.

All kinds of questions were swirling around in my head, basically amounting to, “What happened here?”

By the look of things, this house had once indeed been a home. There had been someone here to drive the old car, to likely walk out to the mailbox on a warm summer’s day and sit underneath the pines on a cool autumn evening.

And there was someone here who obviously admired the simple and profound magic produced by mixing sunlight, rich earth, a little bit of rain and a few flowering plants. I wondered whether this unknown gardener was here long enough to witness for themselves the exquisite crocus garden beneath the twisted branches of the apple tree.

Did someone die, lose a job, divorce, go to jail or endure some other hardship? I saw no toys or swings or other signs of children around the place. I was reminded of something Bob Dylan wrote: “I see the screws breaking loose, I see the devil pounding on tin, I see a house in the country being torn apart from within.”

Did these people maybe just leave to be gone for good? Gone from the hardscrabble living a lot more than a few people find within these remnant locations – scatterings of bleak houses, situated between rusted railroad tracks, broken-down, left-behind schools, country stores and the cracked pavement off blacktopped county roads that inevitably lead to nowhere special?

There was no way to know, at least not from where I was standing.

John Fogerty wrote, “Looking out across this town, kinda makes me wonder how all the things that made us great got left so far behind. This used to be a peaceful place, decent folks, hard-working ways.”

That spring day, I was like most people, I suspect.

I was on my way to another thing, in another place, with my watch running slow amid the relentless crush of demands of this world, and its nagging “Where-are-you?” technology, tugging at the corner of my jacket.

It felt like someone had ahold of my arm, leading me away from this lonesome and quiet place where I could have sat all afternoon, just wondering.

Before I left, I did take several photos of the dazzling spring crocuses.

I wanted to bring with me a little bit of that garden out from under the shadows of that apple tree and whatever happened to those folks in the green-metal house.

I wanted to shine for these people a little bit of the light they’d left behind in their presumed misfortune – that magnificent blanket of flowers. And so, I share this story and photos to try to spread around the beauty left outside the door, at the side of the road.

Of course, I could have this whole thing wrong.

Maybe the people who once lived here found a big payday somehow – a la “Kinfolk said, ‘Jed, move away from there.’” I want to hope that’s what happened – “swimming pools, movie stars” – however unlikely.

At the very least, I hope they made out alright someplace else, in another state, country or atmosphere.

Maybe right now, there’s a lady on her knees in the green, spring grass, with a garden spade, digging a hole in the ground.

In the distance, there’s an old man approaching. He’s taking a good long time to get there because he’s trying to roll a big, knobby truck tire in a straight line. He’s going to roll that wheel until it falls over on its side next to the lady, under the shade of an aging apple tree.

In the skies above, swallows tip and turn, the breezes are warm and light.

Back up on their new porch, with the green-metal roof, the couple will later sit and sip something sweet while the sun falls behind the pines. Cool air descends, bringing down the purple night.

Those tough times they might have had trying to make a life living in the Michigan north woods exist now only in their dreams and memories, a long time gone. Maybe there’s a picture of their Michigan crocus garden hanging on their wall.

Meanwhile, that old house, with the torn screens and sagging frame, sits alongside the road with the howling elements of nature pounding a little harder on the roof and walls each year – sensing weakness in the structure, the inevitable decay and demise.

But under that tree remains, a delight for the eyes and the soul – a promise of renewal, regeneration and revival – the purple and white crocuses, with a few dashes of yellow sprinkled in.

No more than a few inches tall, they have the unlikely power to stop a passing car whirring along the roadside, to make a man get out with a camera to wonder and to think.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnrstories&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=U20ao62kbV%2Fedj3rgGgTm3EA2rfO8hjmbjT4bkWKjqs%3D&reserved=0). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnr&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=TMCcnU%2FKDgJ3wtETsavS02wg5uONhGtA9r5za9kGouA%3D&reserved=0).

**/Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](mailto:pepinj@michigan.gov), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. This feature was previously issued as an Outdoors North column. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Crocus – 1:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204725/Crocus%20-%201.jpg) A couple of rows of crocuses ringed the outside of a knobby rubber tire in a beautiful garden found not far off the side of the road.

[**Crocus – 2:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204726/Crocus%20-%202.jpg)Not far off the side of the road, in the yard of an abandoned home, a beautiful, simple garden of crocuses grew – a delight to see.

[**Crocus – 3:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204727/Crocus%20-%203.jpg)The simple and profound beauty found within a spray of flowers is hard to describe.

[**Crocus – 4:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204728/Crocus%20-%204.jpg)White crocuses in a tight concentration grew between a spring mixture of purple, white and yellow blooms.

[**Crocus – 5:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204729/Crocus%20-%205.jpg) In the shade of a knobby apple tree, these crocuses were a welcome sign of spring.

[**Crocus – 6:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204730/Crocus%20-%206.jpg)Petals opened, soaking in the sunshine, these crocuses flourished.

[**Crocus – 7:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204731/Crocus%20-%207.jpg)A few yellow crocuses were splashed in with the rest of the lavender and white spray, found not far off the side of the road.

[**Garden:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/05/03/file_attachments/1204733/Garden.jpg) A beautiful crocus garden, with a knobby rubber truck tire, underneath an apple tree, outside an abandoned home.**/**