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A Very Special Place, Indeed

Editor's note — This article was submitted by Long Beach resident Tim Perry.



Tim Perry stands in front of the Peter Pan Cottage he is renovating at Stop 18. Photo by Andrew Tallackson

At the ripe old age of 54, I decided to read Peter Pan. The story, if you've never read it, is about imagination, creativity, magic and make-believe. We are all born with a young creative mind. Over the years, work stress and adult pressures can change all that. In the book, Peter Pan stays young, while the other characters grow up and stop believing in all the magical things he showed them when they were young.

Everybody gets old eventually, except Peter.

I started coming to Long Beach in 1978 when I was 12. Like every 12-year-old boy, I had an active,

creative, playful spirit. The beach was a wonderful place to escape and dream of surfing, fishing and exploring. It offered everything a young, active 12-year-old mind could want. The sand and water had a magical effect, making everything seem OK.

"The healing power of the lake," as we all say in my family — to this day.

So how does this relate to Peter Pan? First, some background.

In 1978, my Dad drove us here in the family station wagon. Dad owned a towing business on Chica-

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go's North Side. He was a middle-age, stressed-out, street-smart ex cop who needed a place to get away. A distant relative was selling a house at something called "Stop 18." Dad decided we needed to check it out. So, my two younger brothers, my sister, my parents and I drove down the skyway toward Indiana that September day.

away and live on the beach if he didn't buy it. I was planning on where my beach hut would be, and how he would miss me and regret not buying it once I was gone from our Chicago home. I was sold on Long Beach, and I didn't care who else was. I was going!

Fortunately, after a few good weeks of towing illegally parked cars in Chicago, Dad made the announcement. He was able to come up with the funds to buy the Stop 18 beach cottage. We would have



The exposed beam with the words Peter Pan Cottage written on it.

We finally got past the steel mills and the traffic and arrived here. I had never seen anything like Long Beach. It was fantastic. There were huge crashing waves, sand dunes, endless beach and trees everywhere. For a 12-year-old boy from the city, Long Beach was like a Caribbean oasis. I imagined surfing, fishing for sharks and listening to the Beach Boys in my own backyard. I begged Dad to buy it. It was paradise. I needed to be here. He walked around the house and didn't say much. Finally, he protested that the house was nothing more than an old cottage, and it needed a ton of work. It wasn't even winterized, he pointed out. We got back in the car and drove back to the city in silence.

I was devastated. I fantasized how I would run

it by the end of September 1978. I was beyond ecstatic. It was just a few weeks before I turned 13. I asked for a surf casting fishing pole for my birthday. I wanted to be on the beach, catch fish, live in the cottage and make it my home. My imagination ran wild. Finally, a place to escape to.

Long Beach was the center of my life for many years after that. We celebrated every fourth of July here, every Labor Day and every birthday I can remember. My high school graduation party was on the beach. In college, I would sneak up here while at Illinois State University with friends and roommates. I was always proud to show off this place to people who had no idea it existed. I even proposed to my wife on the beach here. Magical is the best way

I can describe being here. Then *and* now.

One day in 1996, Dad decided he could no longer keep the house. I pleaded with him not to sell it. His health was failing, and it was time to let it go, he explained. I was now 33 and recently married. My wife and I were expecting our first son. Could we afford it? We pondered every option and finally made the decision, buying the Stop 18 cottage from Dad. We wanted to raise our kids here and keep it in the family. Too much history to let it go.



Tim with his father at Michigan City's harbor in 1990.

That fall in 1996, we embarked on a renovation project. The cottage needed updating, and we wanted to make it "our own." It was during the renovation that the little old man showed up. He was knocking at the front door. At first, I didn't know where the sound was coming from since everybody used the side door and people seldom knocked. I ran upstairs and pulled open the door. There he was: small, old, with periwinkle blue eyes staring up at me. He looked to be about 90.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"What are you doing to the cottage?"

"Well, sir, I'm sorry, but I didn't get your name," I replied.

He gave me a broad smile, gazing up at me with his twinkling blue eyes and said, "I didn't offer my name, young man. I hope you know what a special place it is that you have here, and I just wanted to know what you're doing to The Peter Pan Cottage?"

Stunned, I said, "Well, we're doing a kitchen and the bath and...What did you just call this place?"

He repeated, "The Peter Pan Cottage. Don't know where you live? This place was moved here from The Mother Goose Village when I was a boy in the 1930s, and it was called The Peter Pan Cottage there, and it's called The Peter Pan Cottage here. But, of course, you know that, right? I wanted to make sure you took good care of it. It's a special place, A VERY special place," he repeated as he turned to walk away.

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I watched him continue down Lake Shore Drive. He turned to give me one last look and pointed at me. "A very special place, indeed," he repeated.

Did he just wink at me?, I wondered.

Bewildered, I watched him until he was gone.

I locked the front door and came downstairs. My wife was with the baby.

"Who was at the door?," she asked.

"Some crazy old guy who told me we live in the Peter Pan Cottage, and that it came here from the Mother Goose Village in the 1930s."

"Oh, that's nice," she said.

I didn't give it a second thought...until 22 years later when I made the present discovery.

This year, we decided to renovate the cottage. Since we bought it from my dad in 1996 and did our first renovation, the wear and tear of our three boys, countless parties and weekends here, not to mention broken pipes over the winter, was finally taking a toll on things. Dad was now gone and the boys were in college. It was time to fix up the place again.



The old toy truck discovered under the cement floor of the cottage. Tim researched the manufacturer on Google, learning it was made by Sun Rubber Co. in the 1930s.

We hired the right guy and drew up some plans, watching as his crew started the job.

It soon became apparent we needed to vacate the cottage so the work could progress. We moved into a rental at Dunescape down by Stop 1. As of this writing, we are still there.

One afternoon, a few weeks ago, our contractor called and asked me to come by and see something at the construction site. I was amazed at how the house looked with all the walls removed. As I commented on the demolition progress, he pointed up at the now exposed steel beam that supported the main part of the house.

"What do you suppose that means?," he inquired.

It was the first time I had seen the exposed beam since it was covered in plaster and wood for the last 80 years. I looked up and saw the writing on the beam.

"Peter Pan Cottage."

I said the words aloud and looked at him. He informed me it was written on the inside of all the window jambs, too. I thought about what had happened 22 years ago and remembered the little old man.

I was told about this a long time

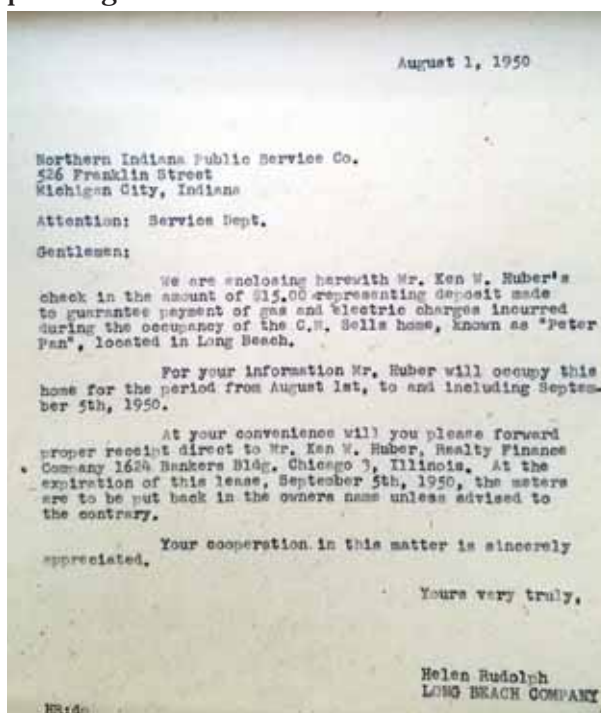
ago, I explained.

By who, my contractor asked.

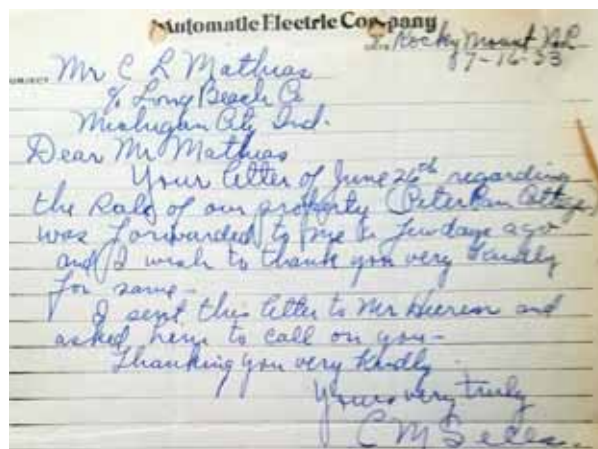
I spoke of the man at the door. Funny, I thought. He would be over 100 now, and I hadn't seen him other than just that one time. How did he know, I wondered.

Later that day, I was back at our rental at Dunescape. I was telling the story of the Peter Pan Cottage

to our neighbor, a longtime Michigan City resident. I added the part about the little old man with the periwinkle blue eyes, and how crazy it all sounded that a cottage called Peter Pan would be moved to Stop



Old correspondence Tim has about the cottage.



18 from some other place called The Mother Goose Village. As my Dunescape neighbor listened, he gave me a more serious look.

“Well, you know where the Mother Goose Village was, don’t you?”

I laughed. “No, I don’t know where the Mother Goose Village was,” I replied, shaking my head. “Next to Neverland, I guess,” as I rolled my eyes.

He went on to explain that The Mother Goose Cottages were a collection of cottages here in Michigan City for many years, and they were located exactly where we were standing.

The Dunescape property is built on the site of the Mother Goose Village, he exclaimed

Where the Peter Pan Cottage was originally located, we both said at the same time.

Let me get this straight, I said. So, my house is the Peter Pan Cottage, and it used to be located in The Mother Goose Village, which is now Dunescape, So

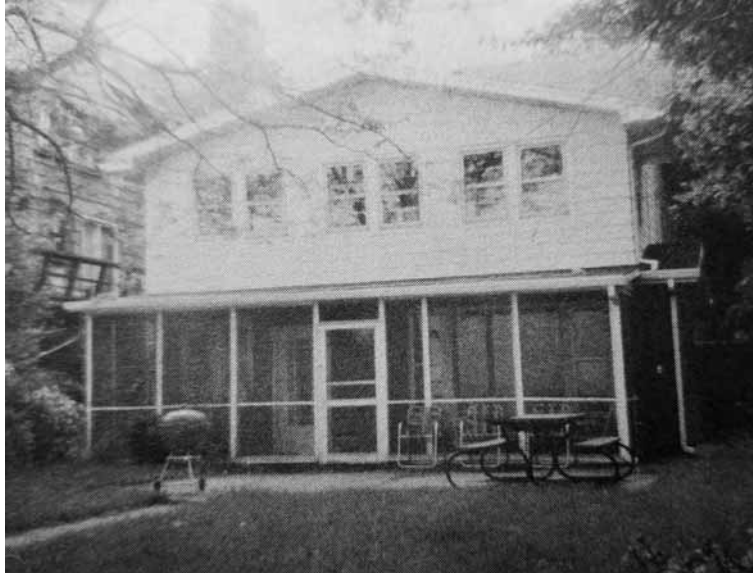
my house, the Peter Pan Cottage came from here, The Mother Goose Village, and was moved to Stop 18 and I came from Stop 18 because of the renovation to the Peter Pan Cottage, and rented a place where my house was more than 80 years ago? Exactly where the Peter Pan Cottage came from?

He looked at me with a laugh and said, “You got it!”

So, I am back where it all started now. And that’s why I decided I had to read Peter Pan, a fiction

book about imagination, mystery, intrigue, fantasy and make-believe.

Something about all of this must make some sense in the book, I thought. And from the book, I realized a few things. Keeping a young mind, keen imagination and playful spirit will keep you young. That is what it did for Peter Pan. And this is what the Peter Pan Cottage has done for me all of my life. The fictional tale made some sense after all.



This undated photo shows the cottage in its former glory.

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Salvation Army “Stuff A Bus” Food Drive This Saturday Sept. 8, 9 am - 3 pm at both Al’s Michigan City Stores



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Tim today with his wife and sons.

Or maybe, it's not all fiction. The Peter Pan Cottage in Long Beach is real, and so is the Mother Goose Village. And who was the little old man? Did he live in The Peter Pan Cottage 80 years ago? Did he write Peter Pan all over the insides of the house when it was moved?

Was he Peter Pan? I found an old toy truck under our cement floor when they were removing underground pipes. Did this belong to him when he was a boy?

While some of the events will remain a mystery, other puzzles became clearer to me.

I now know why I keep coming back here, and why I always feel a little happier when I get here.

It's because when I am here, I still have the same wonder and enthusiasm I had when I was a 12-year-old boy. The starry nights, the squeaky sands and train horns in the distance can stir an old soul and ignite a young imagination.


Imagination, creativity, magic, fantasy and make-believe. A young creative mind is something we are all born with, and some of us are lucky enough to keep.


Peter Pan did.

Or, as a very old man once said to me, "A Very Special Place, indeed."

(Tim Perry is a Realtor with @ Properties in Long Beach. He spends his free time writing, painting and enjoying Long Beach with his wife and three sons.)

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