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Watergate-Watching In Small-Town America

From Washington, the thumb of Michigan—a principally rural and small-town area jutting into Lake Huron—seems remote. From the thumb of Michigan, Washington—the center of American government—seems equally remote. Yet the residents of both areas see the same national television programs, read the same syndicated newspaper columns and subscribe to some of the same periodicals.

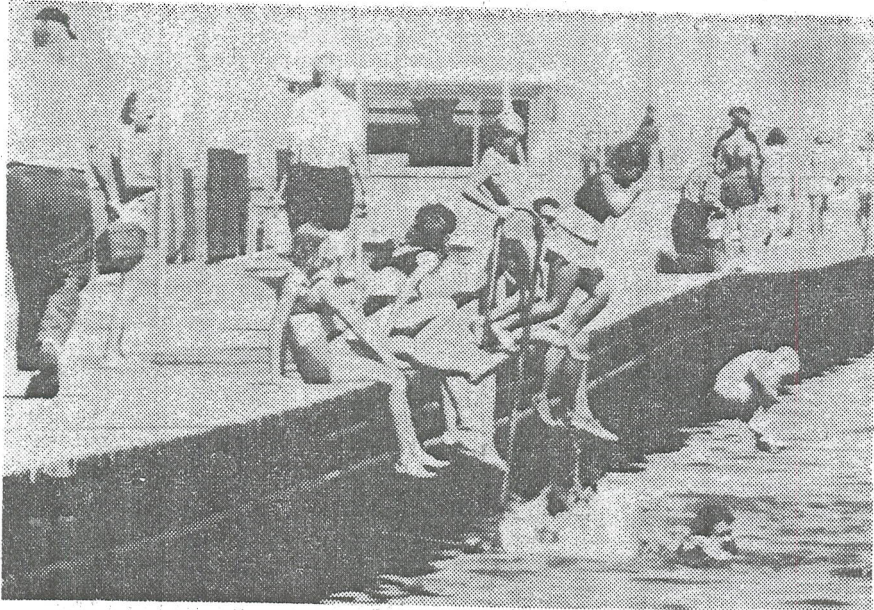
Considering that they share their primary sources of current information, the difference in their reactions to the Watergate affair and related scandals is remarkable. This difference cannot be accounted for, though it often is, by the assumption that Washington's political sophistication is unmatched in the hinterland. Politics and its practitioners are as well understood in county seats as in the federal seat—maybe better.

It is my impression after six weeks in Harbor Beach, Mich., that most of

The collateral fact that there are no pre-conditioned Nixon-haters among Republicans and not many even among Democrats in the district is more important. Most of my Michigan neighbors either never heard of Alger Hiss or Helen Gahagan Douglas or have long since forgotten such characters in the Nixon saga. To them, Mr. Nixon is still the clearly preferable alternative to Sen. George McGovern.

Another, even more important fact, is that the people of the Eighth District are doing very well. Unemployment is low. Employment at good wages is high. Even with prices where

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The dock at Harbor Beach: "Politics are as well understood in county seats as in the federal seat—maybe better."

its inhabitants think, as do most Washingtonians, that President Nixon, while he may not have had prior knowledge of the Watergate burglary and other dirty tricks of the 1972 campaign, knew about and may have participated in the cover-up. But it is taken for granted in this town, to a degree that it is not in Washington, that President Nixon will finish out his second term, still in command of the nation's destinies.

I am not surprised that Gallup finds 71 per cent of Americans unconvinced that Mr. Nixon is wholly innocent of guilty knowledge, if not guilty conduct, in the Watergate scandal and nevertheless that only 18 per cent think he should resign or be subjected to impeachment. If I judge the attitude of The Thumb anywhere near right, this Gallup outcome reflects it. In this, the thumb represents the norm and Washington the eccentric.

The Eighth Congressional District of Michigan, which embraces The Thumb, is traditionally Republican. It gave Mr. Nixon an overwhelming majority in 1972 and returned its Republican Congressman, James Harvey, an almost two-to-one vote. But this is not the whole explanation for its tolerance of President Nixon, guilty or not.

they are, there is very little grumbling in the supermarkets, probably because the farmers are sharing in the take. The gasoline shortage is one of several irritants. But irritants are tolerable when there is money in the pocket. The state of the dollar and the stock market are not primary concerns when the fishing is good in Lake Huron. Interest rates are, however.

There is no disposition in my Michigan neighborhood, as there seems to be in Washington, to regard the succession of Watergate witnesses before the Ervin committee as a parade of scoundrels. To the contrary, television has given some of them matinee-idol status. John Dean was a hit, I was told, at the beauty parlor. He reminded some of the older ladies of the late Leslie Howard—clean-cut, regular-featured, soft-spoken, the kind of fellow a woman would want her son to be or a girl her beau. (The hearings were winning some of the audience away from

the soap operas, even when rotation of coverage by the networks permitted a choice.)

Almost all the witnesses up to John Mitchell (his time came after I had returned to Washington) made good impressions. Their stories, however contradictory of each other, were individually plausible. To suggest that Dean's conscience didn't quicken until he was caught and on the hunt for a way out at the expense of former associates was to start an argument. Hugh Sloan, Jeb Stuart Magruder and even James McCord won sympathy.

There is something hypnotic about that electronic box. It used to be said that it was so revealing of character that it would automatically sort the good from the bad politicians. Now it seems more likely that almost anyone of decent appearance, having a consistent story to tell and sufficient exposure, can be a TV hero.

Members of the Ervin committee have struck a public relations bonanza. The chairman himself, however favorably known to his colleagues and to his constituents, was unknown nationally until now. Almost overnight, he has become the country's symbol of wit and wisdom, integrity and perseverance. Co-chairman Howard Baker comes out of the tube so personably that he inspires presidential talk. The country has discovered Herman Talmadge.

It must be said that the committee has earned its good image. Unlike some previous senatorial investigating panels, it has not cast itself as the heavy by bullying witnesses and indulging in temper tantrums. It has pursued its serious purpose courteously and with becoming restraint. Any of its members and even some of its witnesses would do well running for office in The Thumb of Michigan though not, probably against Jim Harvey.