



© 2014 Jim Yackel  
All Rights Reserved

## Chapter 1

### The Beer Cave

The condition of the U.S. economy in August of 2013 was akin to a distemper-infected German Shepard. The big old dog was staggering and stumbling due to seizures and some paralysis - but The Powers That Be had not yet administered the kill-shot that would serve as the euthanasia to put the dying canine out of its misery.

Fifty year old Jeff Seagraves had maneuvered through a variety of occupations in his adult life. Most notable was his lone stint of self-employment; owning and operating with his wife Cheryl an antiques shop called *Waxing Nostalgic* in what would become the abandoned and gutted Tri-County Mall located in Baldwinsville, New York. Jeff had always loved garage sales and flea markets. With that expertise gained in curios, gewgaws, and collectible relics of value, he and Cheryl took advantage of the cheap rent the deceptively-slowly dying mall offered and opened a location near the its main entryway in 1994.

Indeed, the U.S. economy during the Clinton and G.W. Bush years was a far sight stronger than in those days of perplexity being 2013. Collectors, speculators, gift-shoppers and folks who genuinely waxed nostalgic bought from and sold to Jeff all manner of antiquary including, but not limited to: furniture, coins, vinyl records, toys, dishes, historical documents, postcards, pictures, clothing, militaria, and household appliances. While Jeff and Cheryl - who met at a garage sale of all places - didn't get rich, they certainly earned a consistent albeit modest living after the each month's overhead was paid.

By 2006, Tri-County's owner SyraCore Realty Inc. had become an increasingly poor steward of the structure and for want of a better term, an absentee landlord. A growing list of maintenance issues such as unrepaired leaks in the roof, doors that would not lock properly, and reeking graffiti-tainted public restrooms with leaking sinks and toilets that would go days and weeks without proper cleaning were some of the troubling signs of neglect that pointed to an ownership group mired in malaise and financial struggle in those otherwise prosperous times. The shopping center had lost all appeal to any of the large

anchor stores that came in and out in revolving door fashion and served as drawing cards to customers. Leases were not being renewed as store owners could not generate enough business to make ends meet.

In November of that year a discount movie theater, Waxing Nostalgic, two improperly-ventilated fast food counters, and a sparsely-stocked shop that sold toys and hobby supplies were all the mall had to offer any potential Christmas shoppers. Tri-County Mall was gasping its last breaths as it was no longer a destination for shoppers outside of the immediate neighborhood. At year's end, Tri-County neither would nor could compete with nearby Carousel and Great Northern malls that were considerably larger and far more glamorous. The spring of 2007 saw Jeff and Cheryl's bubble of self-employment burst as they each bounced from one low-paying retail job to the next as the antiques business had died and the mall in total followed quickly behind. Most of the remaining Waxing Nostalgic inventory items were liquidated on the over-saturated online auction monolith Ebay for pennies on the dollar.

Fast-forward to August of 2013, and Jeff wasn't buying into the government talking points that "things were turning around." The reported U3 unemployment rate varied from 7.4 to 7.8 percent; depending on what source you relied on for your information. Jeff knew that the U6 - the actual unspun, unmassaged rate - was 15 percent, and that was far too high for any thinking person to consider as "turning around." But, the American people - or "sheeple" as he referred to them - didn't do much in the way of thinking in those heady days of 2013. The sheeple were as drunk on pro and collegiate sports, reality TV shows and music carrying the not so hidden messages of the Illuminati as they were on the 30 packs of Busch and Labatt's beer that they consumed with rapacious regularity. American men-children were likewise intoxicated on computer games such as *Tomb Raider* and *Grand Theft Auto* and would not wake up and step out of their fantasy worlds to soberly face the deteriorating reality of escalating living expenses, dwindling wages, and the demands of fatherhood in an increasingly debased culture.

Fortunately for Jeff, he did not stand among the unemployed, but instead toiled as a shift supervisor for the MacsMarket store #06 in predominantly upscale Manlius, New York. Despite the flagging economy, MacsMarket was a prospering convenience store chain with its double-M red and navy blue logo adorning 40 corporately-owned and 21 franchised locations scattered about central and northern New York State. Consumers were told to "go to the Macs" in often humorous television and radio ads starring the company's jolly, portly, white-haired and bearded president Jerry Macintosh - his physical appearance being best described as Santa Clause in a white knit pullover sweater bearing the recognizable double-M brand on the left chest.

The residents of Manlius and the nearby albeit poorer communities of Fabius and Pompey did as "Jerry Mac" told them, and they made store #06 the third highest-grossing location in the chain - trailing only behind the Tully and Brewerton stores who enjoyed the advantage of being situated right off of Interstate Route 81 and benefited from the trucking commerce that the highway brought. Concerning location #06, the customers filled up 24/7 with gasoline and diesel fuel, and likewise partook of sub sandwiches, wraps, prepared meals, pizza, donuts, and the considerable inventory of regular grocery items such as milk, bread, canned goods, cereal, potato chips and other salty snacks, fresh produce, candy, and a myriad of items commonly found in a pharmacy or general store.

It was delicious fresh-brewed java that was most commonly the thrust of Jerry Mac's advertising. Seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year MacsMarket stores sold gallons of coffee - 12 to 24 ounces at a time - in white Styrofoam cups bearing the double-M logo. But not including fuel sales, what

the MacsMarket sold most of all was beer. Indeed, consumers went “to the Macs” in droves for cigarettes, blunt wraps, lotto, and all manner of canned and bottled energy drinks and soda - but when it came down to the bottom line it was beer that drew in the masses and kept the MacsMarket in the black; especially so at location #06 and at record levels in the summer of 2013.

While marijuana, cocaine, meth, and prescription happy pills were used regularly and often in concert with each other by the locals, intoxication was the preferred legal method of self-medication in the spiritually-wicked days of 2013, and MacsMarket was the apothecary of choice for Manlius and the surrounding burghs. And in regards to the aforementioned illegal items, they could be purchased under the cover of darkness in the store’s back parking lot from any number of enterprising young men - some of whom were employed by MacsMarket.

Jeff Seagraves generally worked second shift, and was scheduled to leave the Macs on that Tuesday night in August at 11:00. At 9:45 P.M. there were only four customers ordering subs at the food counter while no one waited at the three register checkout to be processed. Jeff manned a spot at the checkout after having just finished the stocking of the 16 door, 42 feet long, 8 feet tall and 8 feet deep glass-fronted display cooler that took up majority of the store’s back wall. The cooler was stocked by entering a stainless steel side door from a narrow hallway leading to a stockroom and the public restrooms. This type of unit allowed for the loading of product into the bottle glides and display shelves from the back; facilitating proper rotation as the customers selected items by opening the doors.

As was often the case, Jeff had strained his back and shoulder muscles that evening stocking numerous flats of soda, crates of milk, and as you would guess - all manner of six packs, twelve packs, and single 24 ounce bottles and cans of beer. At 5’ 11” tall and a taut 175 pounds, Jeff wasn’t a weakling but he was no longer a strapping young man; further indicated not only by the chronically-fatigued mien of his pale blue eyes but by the graying and thinning brown hair worn in a buzz-cut that was concealed under the royal blue cap bearing the double-M logo. The blue cap topped off a uniform featuring a royal blue polo shirt with same logo on the left chest, khaki slacks and slip-resistant sneakers.

Despite its size specs, the large walk-in cooler was too small and inadequate for the amount of inventory packed into and sold from it. MacsMarket execs had often quipped amongst themselves “yup, we built that Manlius store way too small!” Though well lit, working in the overloaded storage area of the cooler was tantamount to maneuvering through a Halloween corn maze. If Jeff or any other clerk were to trip on the scattered milk crates, loose beer and soda cans from broken six and twelve packs or the cardboard left behind by beer and soda reps, the potential to be seriously injured was considerable as they would fall upon other hard and unforgiving clutter.

At the north end of the glass-front cooler was the recently installed “beer cave” - the space it occupied having once been part of the storage area of the main unit. The closet-sized, refrigerated retail room was accessed through another glass door and separated from the main unit only by backless metal shelving, allowing customers to easily view the messy scene-scape that was the storage area of the primary retail cooler. On two of the cave’s three shelving units were stacked 18 and 30 packs of popular beers such as Budweiser, Coors, Michelob, Miller, Pabst, Busch, and Labatt’s. On the third section of shelving that rested against the store’s front wall was a variety of craft brew six packs that appealed to the Manlius haute monde. Fortunately for Jeff, the stocking of the poorly-conceived hole in the wall known as the beer cave was done by the vendor sales reps.

It was not often that there was a break in the customer activity at the cash registers; but Jeff took advantage of this short respite to sip ice water from a 24 ounce coffee cup. As the tall, lanky twenty year old Ethan Steinberg based his cash drawer down to one hundred dollars as his shift drew to a close, the ever vigilant Jeff watched as a man who worked for a local landscaping company pulled open the door to the beer cave and staggered into it while a pair of teenage boys chomped on Buffalo Chicken pizza at one of several small tables in the busy but cramped eating area just before the cave's entryway.

"Whoa, that guy's feelin' pretty good" one of the teenagers announced with a smirk before his friend replied "yeah, dude, just like we're gonna be as soon Kiko pulls up out there with the shit we buyin', yo."

"Yeah" the first teenager continued, "and then we're gonna come back here with wicked munchies and eat this gas station outta business. My dad gave me two hundred bucks today, so we just give Kiko one Benjamin, we put twenty bucks in yer mom's tank, and we got eighty bucks to eat with and maybe take some bitches out for a ride if ya know what I mean!"

"Uh-huh, no doubt, dude" the second teenager cackled in agreement as he pulled his black, flat-brimmed cap off of his head and stood up with his stringy blond hair hanging over his baggy, bloodshot eyes. His friend followed suit and they left their Styrofoam plates and empty Mountain Dew cans on the table for someone else to clean up - this despite there being a trash can being only several feet away.

As the two teenagers approached the double entry/exit door, Ethan Steinberg spotted his two friends while throwing a Bic pen at nineteen year old Zack Reynolds who worked on the food service side. As Reynolds heaved a sleeve of 12 ounce Styrofoam coffee cups back in retaliation to the pen assault, Steinberg addressed the exiting teenagers:

"What you two freaks doin' tonight, yo?"

"Uh, we gonna get transcendental now that Kiko is out there, but we wanna like get some beer too. You gonna get us some?" was the sloth-like response from the burnout with the stringy blond hair.

"Yeah, man, no worries" Steinberg answered enthusiastically. "I got make my fake Vermont license. We'll go down to the Fast-Trac and I'll get us a thirty. But you gotta share some of that weed with me! I'll meet you girls outside after I fudge through my paperwork."

"It's on, man" the blond replied, sounding and behaving every bit the stoner as he nearly tripped over a newspaper display rack as he stepped out the door while his friend trudged behind, scanning through text messages on his Android.

As Steinberg stepped away from the counter carrying the end of shift report and ancillary paperwork in his left hand, his right hand was free to smash against the coffee bar the sleeve of cups that had just been thrown at him, causing a small amount of Styrofoam to tear through the plastic covering and flutter to the grey tile floor like dying butterflies.

As the supervisor on duty, Jeff would have reprimanded Steinberg, but he was instead distracted by the stumbling man who dropped a 30 pack of Busch Lite cans onto the constricted, overstocked counter in front of him. A plastic display of cigarette lighters was knocked to the floor as the landscaper intending to purchase the beer slurred "uh, sorry man" in apology.

“Is that everything tonight?” Jeff inquired with apprehension coloring his voice as he was forced into making a judgment call. Was this bedraggled thirty-something man dressed in a black t-shirt and faded jeans bearing the soil of his toil too inebriated to be allowed to purchase the beer?

This laborer with indiscriminate tattoos applied to his arms and neck helped Jeff’s decision-making by answering “uh, man, I’m really s-s-s-sorry but when I-I grabbed my thirty I tipped backward and knocked a few ‘a those sixers off’n the shelf behind, ya know? It m-m-mus’ be that you guys don’t s-s-stock ‘em real good ‘cuz man, they just fell r-r-r-right down. They kinda smashed but it ain’t t-t-too many like only three er six er somethin’ like that, ya know? Hey, I know yer the only guy on the register so if ya want I can clean up in there for ya after I-I-I-I um, pay for my beer, man.”

“I’m sorry sir, but I can’t sell you the beer because you appear to be intoxicated” Jeff answered with a tone of professional courtesy, before finishing with “and I appreciate you wanting to help, but we’ll get that cleaned up.”

As Jeff pulled the 30 pack from the counter and placed it on the floor mat where he stood, the tattooed laborer with grimy face and clothes answered with a slurred chuckle that deteriorated into a solemn plea:

“I ain’t drunk man, b-b-b-but I plan on gettin’ that way! Jus’ lemme pay for my beer and we’ll be cool, ya know? I like this store and I’m a good cush-tomer. You see me all the time, uh, J-J-Jerry uh, I mean Jeff.”

Jeff remained staid and professional as he answered “sure, you are a good customer, but I can’t sell alcohol to you because you’re drunk. If you have an accident after you leave here, we could be sued and even worse you could hurt someone else. I’m sorry sir, but the law is the law.” As Jeff attempted to reason with the altered customer, Steinberg bellowed “I hate this place! F-M-L!” as he exited.

The four customers who had ordered subs were now in line behind the landscaper and a few others had entered the store. Jeff was succeeding in concealing his irritation with - and disdain for - yet another drunk who did not desire to leave until he had his 30-pack.

A raspy-voiced blond woman wearing smeared lipstick, thickly-applied blue eye shadow, black Harley-Davidson sleeveless t-shirt and blue jeans that appeared to have been spray-painted onto her was directly behind the landscaper in line and was clearly on his side as she hissed:

“Here, let me buy his beer for him then! Just ring it up with my sub, okay? The guy worked hard all day and wants his damn beer. Jee-zus Christ, ya know!”

Jeff the professional continued to conceal his irritation and abject disdain; this time for the many who tossed the name of the Lord around - not in faith, reverence and worship but in cursing lament.

“Ma’am, you can’t purchase it for him. It would be the same as me selling it directly to him” was Jeff’s rebuttal - his irritation now beginning to seep through the cracks of his cool façade like the steam from raindrops landing on hot summer pavement.

As the landscaper gripped the counter so as to keep standing upright while his knees buckled, the ill-tempered blond continued to lobby on his behalf:

“Hey man, don’t be an asshole! What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t you ever need a beer? I’ll buy it and walk out of the store and you won’t see me hand it off to him after he goes, ya know? It ain’t yer problem so just sell me the goddamn beer before my meatball sub gets cold and I get really pissed off! What an ass...”

“Lady, the man is just doing his job. The guy who wants the beer isn’t protesting - it’s just you who is! Now please pay for your food so the rest of us can get on our way” a well-dressed elderly man who was in line behind the blond forcefully interrupted her as three others had now joined the queue fidgeted anxiously while murmuring amongst themselves.

“Don’t you have any other cashiers? I’ve got to pay for my gas and pick my daughter up” was the voice of a young mom further back in the line that was losing her patience and running out of time.

Meanwhile, no one stood at the food service counter as nineteen year old Zack Reynolds and eighteen year old Caleb Grayson laughed obliviously and chatted about rappers Cobe Obeah and Lil’ Wayne while grousing about how much they hated working at MacsMarket before throwing handfuls of shredded lettuce at each other.

“Mind your own business old timer! Buy the way, I bet you stink like urine and mothballs” the blond retorted as she slapped a ten dollar bill down on the counter and stomped away with her sub that cost \$6.99, leaving behind \$3.01 in change. As she reached the doorway, she turned and pointed at Jeff and rasped “this place sucks and I’m gonna make sure you get fired!”

Ironically enough, during the previous exchange the landscaper had staggered away without an argument, having first knocked a small cardboard countertop display of chewing gum onto the floor to join the lighters.

The impeccably-dressed elderly man was next up in the growing line. He laid his 6” turkey sub and bag of sour cream and onion potato chips on the counter as Jeff smiled and said graciously to him “thanks for sticking up for me. Things are a bit unreal around here. I’m too old for this!”

The old gentleman smiled in acknowledgement before Jeff asked “so, is this everything for tonight?” The shift supervisor had the sense that this would be a more “normal” transaction - but what was normal anymore in the summer of 2013?

The elderly man smiled and replied “um, no. I need to play some four-way numbers, just a few. I’m feeling lucky!”

As Jeff moved over to the lottery terminal while watching his line gain length with no one to help him, the old fellow began to fire off his numbers, being less mild in his manner and more businesslike.

“Gimme 4243 fifty-cents straight box, 4040 same way, 0101 same way, 1234 same way, uh no, wait, gimme 1234 combo instead, 1212 straight...”

Jeff politely but firmly interrupted the gentleman who was frenetic if not frantic in his gambling:

“Sir, please slow down a little. The computer can’t go that fast. Now, you’d like me to cancel 1234 straight/box and go combo instead?”

“This joint is a friggin’ goldmine so I don’t know why they don’t hire more help! There’s just one cashier up there!” a heavy-set bald man in his forties roared from the back of the line that now extended into the eating area and almost to the door of the beer cave.

“Yeah, why don’t they have a separate person just to do lotto, ya know?” a female voice carped from somewhere in the lengthening queue.

The elderly man continued “yeah, yeah, just gimme 1234 combo, and then 5515 straight box, 0001 straight box, and then 321 three-way straight box. These are the numbers I always play!”

As Jeff corrected the 1234 play and finished printing the tickets, a squat, chubby 21 year old woman in unflatteringly-short denim shorts bypassed the line and approached the side of the counter before barking at Jeff:

“Your pump 4 is screwed-up! I just pumped what shoulda been 20 bucks in gas but my gas gauge has hardly moved! You ripped me off! My needle shoulda moved more! You need to come outside and see what the problem is!”

As the incensed woman turned and stomped away, a male voice from far back in the throng proclaimed “dude, there’s a bunch a’ broken glass and spilled beer in the cave. I was steppin’ in it and you better get somebody to clean it up before some kid goes in there and gets hurt!”

A younger albeit drunken male voiced “hey homes, if I clean it up will ya gimme a free 12 pack?”

“Why would kids be in the beer cave? Kids can’t buy beer” a tall, lithe, yuppie mom - the likes of which were common to Manlius - answered the man who announced the broken bottles; her blond ponytail that was run through the back of a white cap bearing a pink breast cancer awareness ribbon swung from side to side as she spoke fervently while her fierce blue eyes nearly jumped out of her skull.

Jeff tuned out the discord around him and focused on completing the elderly man’s transaction. He had sorted out the numbers mess and as he arrived at a subtotal, the customer had a twinkle in his green eyes and the energy of a man forty years younger as he directed “and add on that 30 pack that you have down there at your feet. I need to stock up on beer and you won’t have to put it back in that little cave of yours!”

“Sure sir” was Jeff’s reply “but I need your I.D. for the beer.”

“You need my I.D.? I’m 82 years old, son. What kind of bullshit is that?”

“We now have a one hundred percent I.D. requirement for all alcohol, cigarette, and lotto purchases - just like Wegmans or...”

“That isn’t required by law! Must be another one of your stores failed a state sting! Was it this store? Was it you?”

“No, it wasn’t me or this store but the company has one license for all of its stores...”

The elderly man who seemed to gain youthful vitality and not age as the seconds passed interrupted Jeff’s careful explanation:

“I’m not shopping in any of these MacsMarkets after tonight. I’m goddamn 82 years old and I need my I.D.? I know you’re just doing your job but this is absolute horseshit! I’m a retired attorney and I know the goddamn law in this state. Here’s my I.D. Scan it so this horseshit president and his socialist government can track me. Maybe Edward Snowden needs some more reading material over in Moscow!”

The 82 year old retired lawyer paid cash and exited the store with his numbers, food, and thirty pack. As he stepped down into the front parking lot, he handed the 30 pack off to the landscaper who was waiting behind the wheel of a black, rusted 1992 Dodge pickup.

“Drive carefully, Timmy. I’m retired now and I can’t get your ass out of trouble again” the esquire admonished the intoxicated landscaper.

By 10:45 P.M. the line had been reduced to the occasional customer and Donnie Pavone the overnight clerk who would relieve Jeff was running late as per usual. At 10:47 Pavone strolled in seventeen minutes late, bouncing to the music in his headphones as he high-fived Zack Reynolds and Caleb Grayson before be-bopping to the time clock to punch in for his shift.

“What up, Jeff?” the 27 year old going on 18 inquired as he strode behind the checkout counter at 10:52.

“I’m out of here and there’s a mess in the beer cave and on the floor in front of us. You can clean it up because I like you am now running late” Jeff sternly snapped his answer.

“Yeah, cool, whatever” was Pavone’s disengaged response as he inserted a cash drawer into the register nearest the coffee urns and then proceeded to the food service area to make a garlic pizza that he would consume most of.

Jeff did his cash drop and end of shift paperwork. His drawer showed \$52.13 short in cash, but with all clerks running on each other’s registers as per corporate mandate, there was no accountability. It troubled the conscientious shift supervisor that the drawer assigned to him was short, but he was at peace in knowing that he most likely did not make a serious mistake that would create the shortage clerically. Likewise, he would never steal from MacsMarket or from anywhere else.

Once inside of his grey 2000 Toyota Corolla four-door, Jeff bowed his head and prayed with earnest lamentation:

“Father, thank you for getting me through my shift. It was a rough one like most are, and even though it’s a Tuesday night, it seems like the weekend never ends at the MacsMarket. It seems that I am surrounded by sleepwalkers that numb themselves to the decaying world through drugs, alcohol, games, lies, and misinformation.

“Lord, I continue to pray that you have a new thing for me. I am in the wrong element, working in this den of iniquity that is portrayed in TV ads as a family-friendly and fun place to get coffee, food, gasoline and whatever else one would need. Lord, I don’t get paid enough to get my car the repairs that it needs. Cheryl and I can barely afford rent and living expenses. I believe that you have gifted me to do something else, and I pray that you will lead me there. I understand that we have it better than many others Lord and I am thankful. But Lord, my spirit groans to be free of this environment and to be used in a different way. The trouble is Lord, I’m stuck and don’t see any way out. I’ve failed at everything I’ve



done and the enemy has convinced me that you have desired my failure for whatever reason. Please Father, break these chains and free me. Please open my eyes and lead me. Please, let me hear your voice above all others. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen.”

Jeff started the Toyota and kept his left foot on the brake pedal and right foot on the gas to keep the vehicle from stalling. He desired to hear Michael Savage on the radio, but WSYR-FM was carrying New York Yankees baseball which pre-empted the talk show host’s tape-delayed program in the upstate New York market. “I couldn’t care less about the sheeple’s Yankees or baseball” Jeff muttered to himself as he pushed the preset buttons to WFBL-AM to catch the Jason Lewis show.

The news break carried nothing regarding the Syrian chemical weapons crisis as Jeff began his trip to the house on 264 Rouse Street in Chittenango that he and Cheryl rented. The early stages of the drive along Enders Road were unpleasant as a black 2013 Lexus RX 350 SUV carrying six wasted eighteen and nineteen year olds tailgated him with its high beams reflecting off of the Toyota’s rear-view mirror. Jeff resisted the urge to slam on the brakes and put the waste-cases through the tailgating vehicle’s windshield and into his trunk.

“I’d end up injured worse than them. It would get me out of that crappy job and earn me a nice settlement, but no, I can’t do it” he verbalized his distressing thought to no one.

After turning right onto Route 173 Jeff pulled over onto the dark narrow shoulder and let the trailing SUV which still nearly hit him go past. As the kid with the stringy blond hair from a short time before gunned the engine as the song *Thrift Shop* by rapper Macklemore blared from the vehicle’s open windows, Jeff estimated that the Lexus reached 80 MPH before it rounded the curve near North Eagle Village Road and its taillights disappeared from sight and into the dark of the starry summer night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Get *The Sleepwalkers* in Kindle and paperback at <http://www.amazon.com/author/jim.yackel>