

# Strait Shooter

*Mackinac and Bipartisan Politics the Heart of Dennis Cawthorne's Career*



Photo by David Trumple

*by Chris Christoff*  
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*"He is one of the great political junkies, great history junkies, you'll ever meet, probably the best in Lansing."*

Dennis Cawthorne has been part of Lansing's political scene for 43 years, so there are few questions left about the veteran lobbyist, ex-wunderkind Republican legislator, world traveler and Mackinac Island's most ardent advocate.

But here's one: how did he get that choice property on Mackinac Island's west beach, where he built the only house outside of the downtown that's right on the water, with a stunning view of the Mackinac Bridge and sunsets?

In 1969 he scooped it up for a bargain \$2,200 from a furniture company in Charlevoix that had repossessed it. The previous owner, a pipe-smoking acquaintance on the Island, had offered the property to Cawthorne during a conversation.

“Turned out he owed the furniture company the exact amount, \$2,200,” Cawthorne said.

He was only 29, single, a rising star in the state House. Four years later he built a modest second home on the parcel and the bond between Dennis Otto Cawthorne and Michigan’s island jewel was sealed forever.

He says the land, with 100 feet of beachfront, may be worth \$250,000.

“I happened to fall into it,” he said. “I’ve had deals where I’ve gotten the short end of the stick over the years. It so happens this one was a major winner.”

The Mackinac Island acquisition could be an allegory for much of Cawthorne’s life story, a result of being in the right place at the right time and having the instinct to make the most of it.

At 69, Cawthorne is winding down his involvement in the lobbying firm he formed in 1999 with former attorney general Frank Kelley, an old-school partnership forged by political skill, connections and respect.

Kelley took Cawthorne by surprise when he approached him with an offer. Their client list includes such blue chippers as Wal-Mart, DTE, Ford Motor Co., American Express, Detroit Pistons, AT&T and Sallie Mae.

Cawthorne himself is a touchstone to a political era remembered as less venomous, when partisan divisions were more often bridged by the art of the deal. His career after the legislature is marked by his association with Democrats as much as Republicans.

But of all the things he’s accomplished, of all the places he’s traveled and impressions he’s made, Mackinac Island is probably Cawthorne’s enduring legacy.

The association happened early. As a 20-year-old college student, Cawthorne took a summer job on the island loading carriages and so impressed the manager as a go-getter he was asked to manage the island’s chamber of commerce the following year. He did that each summer through law school.

Years later, Cawthorne would land perhaps the most coveted political appointment in all of state government — a seat on the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, which oversees Michigan’s first state park. As testament to his political skill and stature, Cawthorne was appointed by both Governor John Engler and Governor Jennifer Granholm. He served as chairman of the commission for a record 16 years until he was replaced by Kelley in 2007 (Cawthorne now serves as vice chair). He’s done much to protect the island from overdevelopment, and he has considered writing a book about his island experiences.



Cawthorne and his bicycle are a familiar site on Mackinac Island.

[Photo by Dave Trumpie](#)

Cawthorne built the Village Inn, one of the island's most popular eating and drinking spots. He's registered to vote on the island and is often seen riding his bicycle there during the summer.

"Dennis once told me the thing he's most proud of in life is the Village Inn," said Bill Ballenger, a former state senator and publisher of the newsletter *Inside Michigan Politics*. "He was more proud of that than he was of his legislative career."

Ballenger added, "He is really an amazing figure. Honestly, he is one of the great political junkies, great history junkies, you'll ever meet, probably the best in Lansing. He and I are gluttons for that kind of thing."

His unusual, early fascination with politics drove Cawthorne to Harvard Law School (after Albion College), the Michigan House and nearly a run for governor. Cawthorne said he went to law school — he had his pick of Harvard, Yale or Duke — in order to run for office.

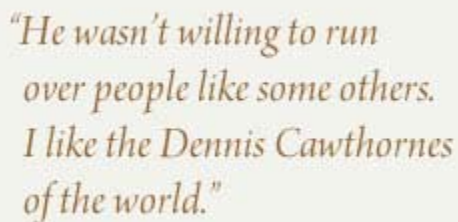
"I always envisioned going up the political ladder," he said. "I really never envisioned practicing law. My main motivation was to enter politics. And if I went to law school I wanted to go to the very best."

There was an underlying purpose as well, he said. “I liked people, and I’ve always sort of rooted for the underdog. I always liked to think I could do things for people, the underdog. This sounds really strange coming from a Republican, I know. ...It may also explain to this day why I’m a Northwestern football fan. Ever since grade school.”

### **From the start**

Cawthorne is a walking encyclopedia of Michigan history, especially politics. As a teenager he read about presidents and combed through Michigan Manuals, memorizing election results, spotting voting trends. As a politician he’d remember not only constituents’ names, but their relatives’ names, too.

“I have a very unusual memory. You might say it’s selectively photographic,” he said.



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of the world.”*

As a boy in industrial Manistee, Cawthorne delivered the local newspaper, browsing the front page for political news. He was drawn to Republican personalities and to the GOP’s Republican free enterprise mantra. This was a kid who at age five grew and sold radishes for 5 cents a bunch to neighbors. (His father was a bookkeeper, his mother a substitute teacher.)

“In 1952 the Democrats had baggage,” Cawthorne said. “It was pretty hard for a 12-year-old to be enthusiastic about the party of Korea, corruption and communists.”

He was so taken with presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower that he formed Young People for Eisenhower, 17 kids who each paid 5 cents a week in dues. Cawthorne drew the attention of the Associated Press. Then he drew the attention of Ike himself.

Cawthorne still displays in his office the hand-signed letter from Eisenhower acknowledging his club and exhorting him to work on his 1952 presidential campaign. And to this day, Cawthorne says he still remembers the names and addresses of virtually ever customer on his paper routes.

In 1956 Cawthorne, then 16, worked on Republican Robert Griffin’s first campaign for Congress. Cawthorne studied voting patterns and in a letter to Griffin brazenly predicted he would win Manistee County by 300 votes, against conventional wisdom. Griffin ignored the letter.



Cawthorne as general manager of Mackinac Island Chamber of Commerce while a Harvard Law student, 1963.

He won Manistee County by 286 votes. He won the election. (He'd go on to the U.S. Senate and eventually the Michigan Supreme Court.)

The next summer, Griffin spotted Cawthorne at a Dairy Queen in Manistee. Recalling the teen's election prediction the year before, Griffin asked him to work in his Washington D.C. office as an intern. There were only a few interns in D.C. at the time. The experience further stoked Cawthorne's political fires.

He was elected to the state House in 1966 at age 26 and served 12 years, four of them as Republican minority leader when Democrats held a solid 66-44 majority. He was headed for higher office.

Bobby Crim, who served as Democratic House speaker from 1974-82, said Cawthorne was pragmatic and willing to work out compromises. "We even helped each other out with our own caucuses," Crim said.

He said Cawthorne was ambitious but not obsessed with higher office. "He was a good person, it wasn't all-consuming for him," Crim said. "He wasn't willing to run over people like some others. I like the Dennis Cawthornes of the world."

As a legislator Cawthorne showed a literary flair, writing his own press releases. He says attention to details helped him as a legislator and lobbyist.

"I think it's important that you can somehow connect with people on a personal level," he said. "I've been blessed with a very unusual memory, and I can have a conversation with a newly-elected legislator and make some kind of personal connection through my knowledge and memory of people and things about the district."



Being sworn into the House at age 26 by Clerk Thomas Thatcher, January 1, 1967.

Cawthorne said he's relied on knowledge of facts to advance causes. "I think such success as I may have had were based on credibility and a thorough knowledge of state government," he said. "And the ability to relate in some personal way with the legislators and the executive branch."

He added, "You have to have credibility with the people you're seeking to inform and influence. They have to have some degree of confidence that you're being honest with them and they can rely on what you say."

Cawthorne said adding or deleting a single phrase or paragraph in legislation can have immense impact.

As "victories" go, he said his influence in the writing of Proposal A of 1994 stands out. That was the landmark school finance reform approved by voters, and Cawthorne represented northern Michigan school districts as the legislation was drafted.

He said he went on a one-man mission to convince lawmakers to increase the minimum school aid to \$4,200 per pupil, instead of the \$3,900 they were pushing. That additional \$300 per pupil went a long way to boosting state funds for poorer districts, and eventually brought them much closer in line with higher spending districts.

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Another lobbying notch was the state's so-called drug immunity law approved some 10 years ago. Cawthorne said his firm was largely responsible for a provision in the law that effectively shields a drug from lawsuits if it has been approved by the Federal Drug Administration — the only state to have such protection. It's also become a political club for Democrats to beat up Republicans who won't agree to repeal the law.

There've been defeats, too. Cawthorne lobbied hard but in vain to keep open a privately operated state prison in Baldwin, against Gov. Jennifer Granholm's pressure to close the prison.

Cawthorne said he's always tried to be honest with clients, telling them the possible downside of legislative action. "We try not to let people walk into political traps, so they don't come back to us and say we led them into a political minefield," he said.

He added, "We try to be straight shooters and pursue our goals with integrity. It's something we really emphasize."



With President Ford as House Minority Leader, 1975.

Yet for all his years in the public forum, Cawthorne offered a startling thought. "I really have no close personal friends. I've had one in my lifetime. I have a wide circle of acquaintances. I have many, many general friends, but no close friends."

There is one, however. Cawthorne bonded with Joe McLaughlin when he was a student in a political science class Cawthorne taught at Muskegon Community College. Cawthorne was 25, McLaughlin was 18.

McLaughlin dabbled in politics, running for the House seat Cawthorne occupied until 1979. He won the GOP primary but lost the general election. McLaughlin lives in Colorado and works in the insurance business, Cawthorne said.

### **Reserved manner**

A self-described introvert, Cawthorne has never been a gladhander or a wine-and-dine lobbyist. "When I tell people I was elected student social director at Harvard they laugh hysterically," he said.

“But I always genuinely liked campaigning, I liked going to factory gates. I liked going door to door, I went to 11,000 doors the first time I ran. That’s a lot of rural areas, too.”

His partner Kelley says Cawthorne is personable but not hail-fellow-well-met. “It’s not natural for him to put on the outgoing personality, it’s an effort for him,” Kelley said. “His approach is thoughtful, gentlemanly. Bill Milliken was also reserved by nature.”

Kelley, who after 37 years retired as Michigan’s “Eternal General” in 1998, could have chosen any number of law firms for his second career. He said liked Cawthorne’s impeccable reputation as a moderate Republican who easily crossed party lines.

“When he was in the House, Dennis was a lead guy for Milliken. He knew state government from top to bottom,” Kelley said.

Kelley said his own reputation for pro-consumer bomb-throwing as attorney general is tempered by Cawthorne’s even-tempered approach and his long relationships with the corporate world.

“He loves financial matters, he loves investments, he loves to be prudent about handling money,” Kelley said. “That’s a wonderful asset. As a public servant I never had to worry about personal finances. Dennis is wise and prudent how to manage our money.

“Plus, he’s just a nice guy. We’ve been together 10 years, and we’ve never had a disagreeable moment or disagreeable word.”



With Gov. George Romney on Mackinac Island in 1965.

Cawthorne said he was “bowled over” when Kelley approached him about a partnership. “It greatly surprised me. In some ways, I didn’t take it seriously,” he said. “His reputation was very important to him. If he wasn’t going to go with a large firm, going with someone with a strong, positive reputation would perhaps be appropriate for him.”

Attorney James Cavanagh was a partner with Cawthorne when Kelley arrived, and left the firm a few years ago. He said Cawthorne's knowledge of history is his strength. "He learns more than most people from history and applies it. He's a very, very good student," Cavanagh said.

"If there's one thing that sets Dennis apart, what I learned from him was to dig a little deeper, make sure of your facts. It makes you look at the other side's argument, dissect it and make your argument stronger."

David Ladd, a partner in Cawthorne's firm, calls him "the smartest man I know."

### **Best/Worst List**

Dennis Cawthorne's career in Lansing as a lawmaker and lobbyist has spanned five governors since 1966, from George Romney to Jennifer Granholm, and 22 sessions of the Michigan Legislature. Among his choices for best and worst:

#### **Best governor**

William Milliken — "He unified many interests in the state and reached across all sorts of political and social lines in an unprecedented way. There's a lot of nostalgia about Bill Milliken, much of it indeed deserved. But the fact is, he barely squeaked out victories in 1970 and 1974."

John Engler — "In terms of getting a job done, I still think John Engler was a very good governor. He could be very heavy-handed in many respects. As far as knowing what he wanted and how to get it done, he is without peer."

#### **Least likely to be governor**

John Engler — "When he was in the House, he was very nearly the last guy you'd have ever guessed would become governor of the state. He was very inarticulate, he was a terrible speaker. And he got under the skin of the Democratic leadership big time. They hated him. Gov. Milliken's people tried to distance themselves from him."

#### **Communicator, but...**

Gov. Jennifer Granholm — "She certainly has great charisma, great communication skills, but it does seem there are some staff voids. There's no chief of staff who is very visible. There doesn't seem to be much of a concerted strategy to deal with the legislature."

#### **Best House speaker**

Democrat Bill Ryan — He was what in Europe would be called a Christian Democrat. He was an ascetic, monk-like, but totally focused, with total determination to achieve his goals, many of which I didn't agree with. I had to greatly admire his skill and tenacity."

Republican Paul Hillegonds — "Even tempered, totally fair, a broad outlook."

#### **Best reform**

Proposal A — The landmark 1994 ballot issue that overhauled Michigan's school finance system. "I always called the property tax issue the great insoluble," said Cawthorne, noting the many failed attempts to cut property taxes in the three prior decades.

**Worst reform**

Term limits — “The House and Senate are too quick to legislate, there’s not enough thought that goes into it. It’s sort of ram and jam these days, I think that’s very bad.”

**Worst legislation**

Short-lived service tax of 2007 — “It was an abomination. They passed this huge tax overhaul in the dead of night with virtually no input, creating a system that anyone with any experience would have known was doomed.”

**Bad idea**

Constitutional convention — “I’m opposed to it. I would argue we have a very good constitution. It’s mainly the amendments adopted since 1963 that have messed things up.” Still, “We really ought to make it harder to amend the constitution. It ought to be tougher to get things on the ballot. Not because we want to diminish the rights of people, but because we’ve made a farce out of the whole petition system by virtue of the fact that money can buy the signatures. How you correct that, I’m not sure.”

**Personal best**

Sponsored legislation to end sand mining on Michigan’s lake dunes. “I had a very good environmental record before it was cool to be environmental.”

**Strange association**

Hooper’s widow — Cawthorne’s grade school music teacher, Callienetta Hooper, was the widow of state Senator Warren Hooper, who was assassinated in 1945 before he could testify to a grand jury about his taking bribes in an investigation of Lansing corruption. The six-year inquiry netted 62 convictions, including 12 senators and 11 representatives. “It purged the system, the culture changed, there was such revulsion toward what happened.”

Stranger still — Cawthorne and Gov. Jennifer Granholm both attended Harvard Law School, though many years apart. They both lived in the same suite in Hastings Hall, plush by student standards, with a fireplace and kitchen. Cawthorne was student council president, Granholm was a resident assistant.

Ladd said besides his knowledge of history, Cawthorne is a ruthless grammarian who can pick up a book on any shelf and find grammatical errors.

Also, Ladd said, Cawthorne taught him that, “If there are 38 senators in a room and one client, you really only have to talk to one person.”

Cawthorne has always had a knack for capitalizing on breaks, said Cavanagh. “I believe in luck, but I believe you can make your own luck,” he said. “Sometimes luck needs to be guided a little.”

Serendipity struck on July 5, 1974, in Rothbury, Michigan. Cawthorne and his House aide were driving home on U.S. 31 from a weekend of July 4th parades. Suddenly, a thirsty Cawthorne ordered the aide to pull off the road to stop at a bar for a beer.

Inside was traveler Cynthia Knoth, also there for a beer. As Cawthorne describes it, “We met, we danced. The rest is history.” They’ve been married nearly 33 years and have two sons, Chase and Brevin.

Some things didn’t work out. Cawthorne yearned to be governor but was thwarted by a series of political decisions by fellow Republicans. He was considered a top candidate to be Milliken’s running mate in 1978, but Milliken instead chose James Brickley.

He was effectively blocked from a run at the U.S. House or Senate. Cawthorne said he once turned down Milliken’s offer of the attorney general nomination.

So in 1978, Cawthorne, frustrated with working in the legislative minority, gave up elected office and formed a law firm with his Democratic friend, Senate Majority Leader William Fitzgerald. The two political rivals were odd-couple roommates in the legislature. (Fitzgerald was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for governor in 1978. Two years earlier, both he and Milliken attended Cawthorne’s wedding on Mackinac Island.)

True to form, Cawthorne remembers the date he and Fitzgerald dissolved their firm: July 1, 1989.

Such are the details of a pictorial autobiography Cawthorne recently published. Only a few were printed as keepsakes, and they’re replete with photographs and press clippings, plus a family genealogy. (His father’s side from England, his mother’s from Germany.)

The book begins: “When I was a boy, I wanted to be president of the United States. For quite a few years, I actually believed I would be.”

Cawthorne’s political career ended prematurely, but life since has been good. He’s visited 50 countries on five continents, 60 major U.S. cities, witnessed historic moments — the investiture of John Paul II as Pope, present at the reunification of East and West Germany, to name but two — made a lot of money and influenced public policy, especially on Mackinac Island.

In 2006 Cawthorne and Kelley sold the majority interest of their practice to Ladd, David Gregory and Rob Elhenicky. Cawthorne plans to manage the practice at least until 2011.

He has this advice for young people who want to pursue politics: “Read and learn as much as you can about government and politics. Go to grass roots political meetings, county conventions. You will find it’s surprising how easy it is to get into politics and to observe the political machinery.”

It also wouldn’t hurt to cultivate a memory for names and faces.

And if someone offers a deal on island property, give it serious thought. It could lead to a million-dollar view of sunsets for a lifetime.

*Chris Christoff is a veteran Capitol reporter.*