

A SIMPLE COTTAGE BY THE LAKE

by Lori Murray

On a late August evening, vacationers begin to meander toward Lake Michigan for another stunning sunset. Parents and grandparents, molded into their Adirondack chairs, scan a few more pages of their novels before the last bit of sunlight escapes behind the horizon. Jeans and jackets keep them warm as unseasonably cool breezes create ripples on the lake. A group of teenagers starts a bonfire on the beach, just as the last kayaker of the day makes his way onto shore.

“Sunset is a big deal here,” says Jen Raabe of Cincinnati, enjoying her eighth consecutive summer vacation at the Jolli-Lodge in northern Michigan, 25 miles northwest of Traverse City. “Most of us don’t think there’s another place like the Jolli-Lodge,” she says.

Secluded among the trees off Michigan 22, the 1924 estate-turned-resort sits high above Lake Michigan, overlooking North and South Manitou Islands, near Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Scattered among the 20 acres are 16 cottages—all with lake views.

The Jolli-Lodge is family owned and mimics the way small-town and lakeside life used to be. That translates into a place where kids can run free. That means playing Capture the Flag and shuffleboard, riding bikes and swimming in the lake. It means evenings sitting in the lodge with a fire in the fireplace, songfests around the piano, picnic-table potlucks on Thursday nights and roasting marshmallows over an open fire. Says Raabe: “It gives my 7-year-old son two weeks of what it was like when I grew up.”

Jennifer Irwin of Tacoma, Washington, and Fran Degnan of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, are lifelong friends who met at the Jolli-Lodge as small children. Their parents started the summer-vacation tradition in 1962. Now with children of their own, they continue to vacation at the Jolli-Lodge. Every year, both families bring all three generations together during the same week at the resort. Last summer, both sets of grandparents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversaries. “Even though we all keep moving, this is the one place that hasn’t changed since we were kids,” says Irwin.

Not much has changed at the Jolli-Lodge since Keith and Ruth Jolliffe bought the place in 1955. The lodge is clad in white wood and green shutters, with classic dormers that overlook towering birch trees. Master of the hill, it overlooks Good Harbor Bay. Inside, much of the original furniture is still in place. “We just never got around to changing things,” says Keith Jolliffe, who still helps his son Greg operate the resort. “Keeping things the same is the only way we could survive.”

Retro light fixtures and furnishings fill the cottages. Classic novels, such as “To Kill a Mockingbird,” stand well used on the bookshelves in the lodge. Postcards are sold on the honor system, monitored only by a coin box. Near the main door, an open guest book records the memories of decades of visitors.

Next to the lodge office sits a mangle. Surprisingly, it is still used every Monday. That's when Keith and Ruth Jolliffe drive to Traverse City to launder the sheets. After the work is done, they cash in the empty cans and bottles from the previous week's guests, and with that money, they treat themselves to lunch. Then it's back to the Jolli-Lodge, where they run the sheets through the mangle and hang them on clotheslines to dry.

Goodbye Akron, Hello Jolli-Lodge

Keith Jolliffe was working as a manager at IBM in Akron when his parents asked him to fly to Michigan to see an old estate they wanted to buy. At that time, just the main house, stables and servants' quarters were there. Jolliffe and his parents placed a bid on the place, fairly certain that it would never be accepted. He returned to Akron, married Ruth and took a promotion at IBM. Soon after and much to their surprise, the offer was accepted. Jolliffe and his bride, along with his parents, left Ohio in 1955 for the Jolli-Lodge.

Fred Vansickle of Princeton, New Jersey, has been vacationing at the lodge since 1966, when he was 6 years old. Now he brings his two children, ages 14 and 10, and his wife, Susan. "As soon as I see the lake, my blood pressure begins to drop," he says. "While I'm here, I am totally unplugged—no e-mail and no phone." Talking about the Jolli-Lodge is perhaps the only thing that can capture his attention during this laid-back time. Placing the book he's been reading on his lap, he says, "There's a constancy to the place, and you can count on it year after year."

His 14-year-old daughter Kathryn agrees. "We always go to the same places while we are here, like certain restaurants where we run into other guests of the Jolli-Lodge," she says. "The kids all go on one outing every year, and we always have a bonfire at night for the teenagers."

Perhaps no one understands what makes the Jolli-Lodge special better than Greg Jolliffe. He and his sister grew up on the property, where summers meant countless playmates and nonstop fun. Now he and his wife, Becky, run the place, and their three kids are having all the fun. He's busy from May to the end of the October, accommodating about 100 guests a week. Plenty of folks would clamor for that lifestyle, and it seems like he knows that. "I appreciate the view more than I used to," he says, an indication that adulthood has deepened his bond with the place.

By now, the sun has gone for the day, leaving only a sprinkling of yellow and orange on the horizon. The silhouettes of a few clouds are hanging in the sky where the sun previously took center stage. High above, the moon has taken control, making its glimmering mark on the water below. The talk moves onto the screened porch where plastic cups of Champagne are toasted to the Jolli-Lodge. For these vacationers, it's their last night, and they are in no hurry to give it up. Tomorrow morning, they will depart for various points on the map, with memories of another Jolli-Lodge vacation to sustain them until next year.