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THIS STORY

An Ernest stopover in Petoskey, Mich.

Posted: June 16, 2006



Dennis McCann

[E-MAIL](#)

Petoskey, Mich. - On the rainy balcony of my room at the historic Perry Hotel, a swell place, a rocking chair slowly rocked.

There was no one in it to rock, but rock it did. Some might think it was the wind at play. I knew it was the ghost of Ernest Hemingway. This region, this city, this very hotel were his old haunts as a boy, so why not now as a spirit. As luck would have it I had on ice a few bottles of Bell's Two-Hearted Ale - "well suited for Hemingwayesque trips to the Upper Peninsula," the label declares - which was in fact where I was headed.

And so I opened one and said, "Come to papa."

I had taken the lake ferry to Michigan from Milwaukee and was headed home the slow way, up the mitten to the big bridge at Mackinac and all across the U.P., but a night in Petoskey was far more appealing than another hour behind the wheel. A night anywhere was more appealing than that but especially in Petoskey, where the Perry promised a night out of the past.

Once the city was rich with such hotels, the luxurious Arlington, the Cushman House and many more. After the railroad reached this part of the state in 1873 it began aggressively promoting the region as a summer playground, and the public flocked here for the beaches and summer air, for what were described even then as "million dollar sunsets" and still are today. They needed places to stay and hoteliers responded.

Advertisement

Eventually, fire and changing public taste - lakeside cottages were preferred over big hotels - changed the landscape and only the Perry, built of brick and known as the city's only fireproof hotel, survived. (Actually, it's a bit lucky it ever succeeded. Its founder, Dr. Norman J. Perry, built the hotel after giving up his dental practice when one of his patients died following a multiple tooth extraction, according to the hotel history. It's amazing anyone stayed with him after that.) Hemingway stayed here in 1916 - it was his description of the Perry as "a swell place" - and today the hotel, now owned by Stafford's Hospitality, is handsomely restored and on the national historic register.

If the old hotels are only a memory, Petoskey and its surrounding area of Charlevoix, Harbor Springs and Boyne remain a popular summer - and for many,

Petoskey, Mich.



Photo/Barbara McCann

Stafford's Perry Hotel in Petoskey is the sole survivor of nearly two dozen downtown hotels early in the last century.



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Lake Country

winter - retreat. The area is one of the country's major golf destinations, boasting dozens of beautiful courses by many of the game's most prominent designers. There are state parks with sand beaches and dunes, hiking and biking trails and small lakes ringed with homes and resorts. There is history to explore, and of course there is Hemingway.

Until almost the age of 20, Hemingway spent every summer in the region, staying at his family's home on Walloon Lake (then called Bear Lake, which was Petoskey's original name as well until it was changed to honor a local Indian named Petosegay). The family would travel by train from Oak Park, Ill., to Petoskey and then board "dummy trains" to the lake area and finally board a ferry to get to their home. Their cottage, called Windemere and still in the family, has been renovated to look as it did in Hemingway's younger days.

Stories set in Petoskey

After he was wounded while driving an ambulance during World War I, Hemingway returned to Petoskey to recuperate and it was here he began writing short stories. Many of his Nick Adams stories - "Big Two-Hearted River," after which my beer was named, is the best known of those - were set in the Petoskey area or the nearby U.P. and contain many local references. In 1921, Hemingway married his first wife, Hadley, at Horton Bay near Charlevoix.

Hemingway is never out of mind in Petoskey, nor out of print. McLean & Eakin Booksellers carries a full catalog of Hemingway's titles, and I wasn't surprised to find a group of women there looking for a specific book while I was catching up on Ernest's local connections. The Little Traverse History Museum in Bay Front Park also has an exhibit chronicling Hemingway's local ties, along with exhibits on the region's extensive Indian history and other topics.

A sort of time warp

Each October, the Michigan Hemingway Society holds a Hemingway Weekend at the Perry Hotel, and Bay Breeze Tours includes Hemingway history on its walking and trolley tours of historic Petoskey and adjacent Bay View, a delightful community of more than 400 nicely preserved Victorian summer homes and cottages founded by the Methodist Church in 1875.

The first time I saw Bay View, by accident on a morning run on my first visit to Petoskey, I thought I had entered some sort of time machine. Founded as a Chautauqua-style summer retreat, Bay View offered music, theater, science and literature discussions and drew thousands of visitors and quickly became a permanent community, though lived in only during warm months. It still operates as a summer colony, offering concerts and programs that are open to the public, and its amazing architecture has landed Bay View designation as a National Historic Landmark.

Certain Methodist sympathies also persist. Bay View has always been a dry community, for example, and the Bay View Inn, a onetime hotel that is now a luxurious inn also operated by Stafford's, was not allowed to serve alcohol. When I stayed there some years ago, guests were allowed to - wink, wink - bring their own wine to dinner, but there was no public bar. So I was surprised to note that this year the Bay View Inn, for the first time in its history, is serving cocktails.

"Prohibition is over!" Stafford's newsletter declared. The Bay View Association, after extensive



Photo/Barbara McCann

Bay View, a tidy community of more than 400 well-preserved Victorian summer homes and cottages adjacent to Petoskey, was founded in 1875.



Photo/Barbara McCann

Bay View, established as a Methodist summer camp, is designated as a National Historic Landmark.

If You Go

- For more on the area, call for a Petoskey-Harbor Springs-Boyer Country guide at (800) 845-2828 or visit www.boynecountry.com. For Petoskey specifically, visit the Chamber of Commerce site at www.petoskey.com.
- For rates and availability at Stafford's Perry Hotel, visit www.staffords.com or call (800) 737-1899 or, for the Bay View Inn, (800) 258-1886. For more on the Bay View Association, call (213) 347-6225 or visit www.bayviewassoc.com.
- Bay Breeze Tours information can be found by calling (231) 526-8888, or visit www.northquest.com/baybreeze.com. Find more about the Little Traverse Historical Museum at www.petoskeymuseum.org.

hearings and discussions, agreed to allow the inn to seek a state liquor license, said general manager Chad McDonald, but only with certain restrictions. For example, still no booze on Sunday, even if the rest of the state allows it.




















History without tackiness

Downtown Petoskey boasts many well-tended historic buildings, so many that the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the city on its distinctive destinations list a few years ago. And while the Historic Gaslight shopping district is promoted as one of Petoskey's attractions, it is generally free of the tacky tourist shops that many summer communities offer.

I had allowed an extra day to personally inspect, on readers' behalf, of course, one of the area's fine golf courses, but the cold rain that had rocked Ernest's chair continued to rock my world the next morning. In the gray and the gloom of the day, I headed north for the bridge at Mackinac and the long haul ahead. Maybe the sun also rises, but not always when you want it.

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