

May 2, 2010

I imagine there are plenty of people who travel around the country going to baseball games, and that those people can tell you everything there is to know about the motels near the various stadiums and the quality of the chili dogs. What they know of America's cities they know insofar as it relates to the game: the convenience of the parking, the freshness of the popcorn. Over time, the things that make us travel can also give us a certain kind of expertise. It could be amusement parks, Civil War battlefields, marinas, museums.

For me it's independent bookstores. Sure, I occasionally go to a city to speak at a library or college, but most of my travel is bookstore-based. I am a novelist, and when I'm not at home writing a book, I tend to be sitting at a small table in the back of a bookstore trying to sell it. I can tell you who has the best selection of birthday cards, who is still serious about poetry, who's got unusual coffee table books. It isn't just that I dip in and out of bookstores. I stay there for hours looking at the inventory. At the end of the night, I'll go to some hotel I won't remember, eat a grilled cheese sandwich at the bar, and then the next morning I'll fly to another city to see another bookstore. I can remember the fiction sections, the new releases table — I just can't remember which store was in which town. Like the baseball fan, I blur the details of anything outside the parking lot. Except in this particular story.

The first time I was sent to Petoskey, Mich., was in 2001. I wasn't happy about it. It was sandwiched into my itinerary among cities like New York, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles. I would have to fly to Detroit, take another flight to Traverse City, rent a car, drive an hour and a half, give a reading, sign some books, get back in the rental car and do the whole thing in reverse. It was such a tight trip that I wasn't even going to get the cheese sandwich. "It's supposed to be a really great bookstore," my publicist said. I said I didn't care. I had already seen really great bookstores, loads of them. She told me I was going anyway.

Here's a universal truth: The really great places are often the ones that are a drag to get to, and they have been able to remain great places for exactly that reason. Try going to Spear-O-Wigwam Ranch in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming (rutted dirt road, straight up) or Isle au Haut, off the coast of Maine (you arrive on the mail boat). Petoskey isn't that challenging, but it's certainly off the beaten path. I drove my rental car down two-lane highways that were riddled with fruit stands, vegetable stands, pie stands, all of them nestled in orchards. Maybe I could have driven past one offer of homemade cherry pie, maybe even three or four, but the fifth time I saw the sign I pulled over. I gobbled down my slice by the side of the road: tart cherries,

flaky crust, none of that viscous red slime that gave the pie a bad name in the first place. I can't tell you where that particular stand was, and it wouldn't matter anyway. In the intervening years I've eaten a great deal of pie while standing by the side of the road in Michigan. It's all been good. This was only the beginning.

That first afternoon when I pulled into town I was short on time and sticky from pie. I was tired and distracted. I had work to do and still another plane to catch. But that didn't mean I was blind. There I was in Petoskey. The houses were wide of porch and steep of gable, many of them painted in the colors favored by seventh-grade girls. Petunias dangled from window boxes. Below the town the sun spread its diamond light over Lake Michigan, over the boats and the swimmers and the shore. The small downtown was a throwback to some simpler idea of American vacations, a couple of ice cream stores that sold taffy and fudge, a gift shop with T-shirts in the window that said lake. Imagine the cast of "Mad Men" driving out to Michigan in wood-paneled station wagons for the summer. Frank Sinatra playing in the hotel bar. Sophisticated restaurants commingling with pie shops. The world was leafy and dappled, quiet and cool. Within 10 minutes I started to wonder how I could spend the rest of my life in Petoskey.

Of course the desire to stay in Petoskey has been around as long as the town itself. The Gamble family came without the Procter family. The Wrigleys came, no doubt loaded down with chewing gum. In their day one could expect to see the Quakers of the oats and the Armours of the potted meats in these parts. The C.E.O.'s of the auto industry had homes around here in the era of auto grandeur, and they could still be coming today — there really is nothing ostentatious about the place that might cause a taxpayer to wonder why the C.E.O. is taking such a fancy vacation. After all, Mario Batali vacations in this region, but so do the regular folk of Michigan, along with the occasional novelist. I was already thinking it would be a fine place to write.

When I walked into the bookstore of this dreamy little town, at that moment, all the other bookstores I've known in my life fell away. Julie Norcross founded McLean & Eakin Booksellers in 1992, naming it for her two grandmothers. Like the town she comes from, she must have a long history of people falling in love with her at first sight. She's one of those supremely competent individuals who would have made an excellent pioneer. One imagines she could build a sod house in a pinch, but she can also tell a joke, drink a martini, run a business. The books at McLean & Eakin are arranged to beckon, and there are plenty of big chairs to fall into once you heed their call. It is the kind of store where I could happily spend a summer.

But on that particular day, I only had minutes before I had to get back in the car. Back at the Traverse City airport I bought a paper cup full of cherries (in the airport!) and ate them while I waited for the plane. I cursed the world that would come between me and the place I loved, and

I swore an oath on my cup of cherries that I would return. I'm a big one for keeping my oaths.

The upper tier of the lower peninsula of the state of Michigan is not the most sensible place to vacation when you live in Tennessee, but when did love make sense? I went back that same summer with my husband, who thought that I had, if anything, undersold the charms of the place in my descriptions. We went back many summers after that. Last summer I had to make two stops for work in southern Michigan, a region of the country that has been the hardest hit by the bad economy. There's an eerie sort of quiet down there. There aren't too many cars on the highways, and downtown stores are boarded over. People are home having yard sales. It wasn't exactly the climate to put one in mind

of rest and relaxation, but it would have been impossible for me to be within a 200-mile radius of Petoskey and not stop in.

Finished with work, I turned the rental car north. For all of Michigan's woes, Petoskey was holding steady. It was the very start of the summer season, and there was a cold wind blowing off the lake, which meant that nothing much was crowded, which meant that I was able to score a premium room at Stafford's Perry Hotel, top floor, end of the hall, balcony overlooking the water. And while the region was still months away from cherries, the orchards were covered over in white blossoms so delicate that the slightest breeze stirred up a blizzard of petals. It makes a person wonder why anyone ever bothers with Japan.

I called Julie, who immediately invited us for dinner. It was a cold evening and still plenty light out when my husband and I drove out to the Norcross house on Walloon Lake, deep in a piney forest. There we piled into their 1960 Chris-Craft along with various members of the Norcross family and, wrapped in blankets, sped across the lake, past the slender docks, past a summer camp for boys, past Hemingway's boyhood summer home (which, when you see the place, makes so much sense for Hemingway), to the Walloon Lake Inn.

It turned out to be a night of much anticipation and celebration, because even if the cherry trees had yet to bear fruit, this was the start of morel mushroom season. Walloon Lake Inn, which has some rooms but is mostly about the restaurant, had thrown its whole heart into the moment of the mushrooms. We ate them in soup and grilled on salads and sautéed on whitefish. We would have happily soaked them in our gin and tonics and eaten them on ice cream. Tender, chewy little marvels, they were the harbingers of every good thing that lay ahead in summer.

I've got no business speaking of tradition in this place. I've never stayed for more than a few days at a time. I've never gone in winter (which, from what I understand, can test the limits of love). Still, I know what I like: strolling through Bay View, a Chautauqua-type summer assembly

that was put together by Michigan Methodists in 1875 “for intellectual and scientific culture and the promotion of the cause of religion and morality.” If you’re just walking through, there’s an amazing collection of three-story houses gingerbreaded up to the fare-thee-well. Jespersion’s Restaurant is where people go for the famous homemade pies (raves for the banana cream), and American Spoon is a jam and jelly store where I have been known to while away entire afternoons picking out gifts. If you never get to Michigan at all, do yourself a favor and order a jar of its sour cherry preserves.

If you feel like leaving, and I can’t imagine you would, you can get mildly ambitious and drive 15 minutes to Harbor Springs to see the houses on the lake that will remind you that the rich are indeed different from the rest of us, or, if it’s late July, you can drive back to Traverse City and catch the film festival that Michael Moore, Michigan’s most outspoken son, has brought to his beloved home state. Or you can head up to see Mackinac Island and sit in a rocker on the porch of the Grand Hotel. They will charge you for the pleasure.

Or, like me, you can go back to the bookstore. I know this is a modern world where books are overnighted to your doorstep and beamed to your hand-held device in under a minute. But even if I went to Petoskey in February and there were no morels and no cherries and no pie, I would still have a good vacation at McLean & Eakin. It is just so thrilling to be around people who read, people who will pull a book off the shelf and say, “This is the one you want.” People who want to know what I’m reading and will tell me what they’re reading so that while we talk, stacks of books begin to form around us. It’s my own personal idea of heaven. It is also, in this age of the overnighted electronic hand-held, a bit of Americana you aren’t going to see everywhere. Like the town of Petoskey itself, a very good bookstore feels a little nostalgic, a place out of time. Look at all those people looking at books! It is at once as rare and ordinary as really good pie.

ESSENTIALS MICHIGAN

HOTELS: Bay Harbor Upscale lakeside development with a hotel and conference center. 4000 Main Street, Bay Harbor; (231) 439-2400; bayharbor.com; doubles from \$175. Stafford’s Bay View Inn Old but nicely renovated hotel operated by the owners of the Perry. 2011 Woodland Avenue, Bay View; (231) 347-2771; staffords.com; doubles from \$149. Stafford’s Perry Hotel Sought-after inn with 79 rooms overlooking Little Traverse Bay. 118 Lewis Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-4000; staffords.com; doubles from \$129.

SHOPS: American Spoon Offers crackers and countless open jars of preserves so you can make your own decisions. 411 East Lake Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-1739; spoon.com. Cutler’s Exquisite kitchenware. 216 Howard Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-0341; cutlersonline.com. Dave’s Boot Shop Worth the trip to Petoskey alone for the its galoshes, embroidered felt slippers and a bargain basement. 403 East Lake Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-1941. Gattle’s Beautiful linens,

nightgowns and embroidered handkerchiefs. 210 Howard Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-3982; gattlespetoskey.com. McLean & Eakin Booksellers The bookstore of your dreams. 307 East Lake Street; (800) 968-1910.

RESTAURANTS AND CAFES: Andante Pricey and chic, with great views and extraordinary food. 321 Bay Street, Petoskey; (231) 348-3321; entrees \$33 to \$39. Crooked Tree Breadworks The place for transcendent Parmesan bread and ginger cookies. 2264 Route 119, Petoskey; (231) 347-9574; breadworks.com. Chandler's Cozy and romantic spot for superb New American cooking. 2151/2 Howard Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-2981; lakeandhoward.com; entrees \$28 to \$40. Jesperson's Restaurant Family-owned since 1903 and famous for its homemade pies. 312 Howard Street, Petoskey; (231) 347-3601; lunch plates \$6 to \$9. Julienne Tomatoes Adorable spot for breakfast and lunch, with the best chocolate chip cookies in town. 421 Howard Street, Petoskey; (231) 439-9250; juliennetomatoes.com; lunch plates \$6 to \$9. Legs Inn Authentic Polish restaurant where the main draw is the woodwork. 6425 North Lake Shore Drive, Cross Village; (231) 526-2281; legsinn.com; entrees \$14.50 to \$25. Walloon Lake Inn Refined American cooking on the lake. 4178 West Street, Walloon Lake; (231) 535-2999; walloonlakeinn.com; entrees \$19 to \$33.