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Monday, Aug 11, 2008

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It's easy to savor summer — and childhood memories — on Michigan's Upper Peninsula

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

HESSEL, Mich. | The cottage looked just as I remembered it, although I hadn't been there for years.

A turn-of-the-century log cabin, darkened by age, it stood at the end of the lane beneath a stand of tall pines, a forest so quiet and cool it seemed lost in time. Lake Huron gleamed through the undergrowth, silvery streaks winking among the branches.

For a moment we were alone with our thoughts, remembering. Then the back door opened, and Margy, our host for this impromptu high school reunion on Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula, hurried out to meet us. Smiling, she hugged me, and the years dropped away.

If you were born and bred in the shade of the North Woods, you know what "HOMES" stands for. The true test for any son or daughter of the Upper Midwest, it was my dad's favorite riddle, a tradition he trotted out at the end of every long car trip.

"Where's home with an s?" he'd ask, grinning into the rearview mirror, while we three kids, crowded into the backseat, squealed in unison, "Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior!"

If you lived in Chicago, as we did, most of those lakes were just names. But not Lake Michigan, a few blocks away. Its sandy shores and gentle waves were our personal inland ocean. We spent many hot summer days at the beach, pretending to ignore our male classmates.

Even better were the August weeks we spent with my grandmother at Loon Lake, near Cecil, Wis. Her green-roofed cottage, shaded by birch trees, had a screened porch, a cold-water pump that wheezed when you cranked it, a narrow pier that ran out into the lake and a drafty two-seater outhouse.

Eventually I discovered that thousands of lakes spangle the great North Woods, like city lights on a dark night. And then Margy joined our circle of friends. Each summer, when school was out, she and her family headed for their cottage in Hessel, on Lake Huron.

There, deep in the woods and with few neighbors, the Raymonds shed their city skins. They lived in their bathing suits. They picked blueberries. They cruised the bay on their speed boat. They water-skied, launching themselves straight off the dock, a stunt I secretly envied.

Mr. Raymond, an enthusiastic fisherman, kept the frying pan busy. And the Raymonds were generous to a fault.



Lake Huron's quiet beauty beckons visitors to Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula. Homes dot the lakeshore in Les Cheneaux Islands.



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Each summer after the school year ended, they invited a bunch of us up to the lake for a week.

What better place, then, for old friends to laugh over the past, update the present and, for me especially, see whether time and tourism had spoiled Hessel's quiet simplicity.

Thirty years ago summer meant downtime. You dunked in the lake, sunned on the sand, picked flowers in the meadows and read novels on the front porch. Adults watched the sun go down. Kids swam in the lake and prowled the woods unsupervised.

But with tourism on the rise, Clark County's 2,000 residents have adapted. Hessel and neighboring Cedarville, now linked as Les Cheneaux Islands, cater to visitors with restaurants, snack shops, motels, cottages, B&B's, gift stores, boat docks and sports rentals.

"Green" before it was a sound bite, the community was quick to realize that the Eastern Upper Peninsula is, in the words of the Nature Conservancy, one of the world's "last best places." Although many old forests were already in national or state parks, additional tracts of private land were protected when their owners donated them to conservancy groups.

"You ought to walk through the Oliver and Edna Birge Nature Preserve," Margy said. "There's a nice nature trail there. The Birge family — they were my mother's friends — donated it to the community to save it from being subdivided and developed. After that, talk to Jessie Hadley. She's done her best to cultivate and enhance a love of nature, sans Jet Skis and snowmobiles."

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