



Ottawa County Gems

AN ESSAY BY NADINE NORDIN

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The water has always calmed me; unknowingly, over my lifetime, I have sought out its comforts again and again. The sound of the surf, the roll of the waves, the splash of the water as it crashes onshore, the smell of the beach, gorgeous sunsets over the sparkle of the water – all of it fits together to make a calm, serene setting. I was born and brought up on the East Coast where some of my earliest family memories were of summer trips to a secluded, private beach, romping in the sand and surf with my older brothers, digging clams and boiling them in salt water on the beach. It comes as no surprise then that it didn't take long for me to feel right at home here near the waters of Ottawa County.

Having been a resident of Grand Haven Township for over 10 years, our family has found many treasures and gems to behold. First and foremost to us, of course, is the beauty and availability of Lake Michigan. Who can believe there is actually a beach in downtown Grand Haven, let alone a State Park and campground? You can spend a warm, summer day at the beach doing a multitude of water activities, walk the sand near the water's edge or just bask in the surf and sun to your heart's content. Each time we round the corner where Grand Avenue meets Harbor Drive near downtown Grand Haven, the ever-changing waters of Lake Michigan welcomes us, and we are still astonished by its natural beauty. Some days, white, foamy waves are rolling fiercely ashore while other days the waves are gentle and relaxed amidst sparkling, blue waters.

For those who may enjoy other activities, a walk along the boardwalk from Chinook Pier, with its assortment of retail shops, ice cream and other special treats, to the recently restored lighthouse is a welcome summer activity for many – locals and tourists alike. And if, for some reason, you can't be there, you can always watch the activity on the channel on Grand Haven's 92.1 WGHN's webcam online.

But Ottawa County is more than just warm sunshine and sparkling waters; there is an abundance of other sights to see and activities to do all four seasons of the year. There is something exciting and enchanting for each season, every interest, all members of the family...yours to discover, everyone's to share.

There are many unique and special shops lining several downtown communities in Ottawa County - from the Italian gifts and gourmet fare offered by Santo Stefano del Lago and the delicate hand-painted earrings from the Calico Cat in downtown Grand Haven, to other exceptional shops along the main street of downtown Holland to the Delft hand-painted porcelain and wooden shoes from the DeKlomp Wooden Shoe & Delft Factory located in Holland Township, to quaint finds like the local puzzle and game shop in Zeeland or the farming museum in Coopersville, wonderful Farmers' Markets with local fare; there is always something spectacular for everyone. You could easily spend a full day just wandering through the shops in any of these communities within our county with tales to tell of the many treasures you found and others you left behind for another day. Our museums offer much rich, local history with minimal or no admission (Tri-Cities Historical Museum, Coopersville Farm Museum, Holland Public Museum).

Outdoor and nature enthusiasts can enjoy one of several nature hikes at several conservation areas, the brilliant fall colors along the Grand River aboard one of the Grand Lady Riverboat cruises (the largest river in Michigan at 252 miles referred to as "o-wash-tu-nong" by our Native American settlers, which means "far-away water" because of its length), a leisurely stroll through the forests of Duncan Woods, explore the trails and one of the largest wide-open spaces in the county in Hiawatha Forest, fish along the banks of the Macatawa River at Hawthorne Pond Natural Area, enjoy the diversity of treasures of our numerous parks, both large and small, snow-shoeing at Pigeon Creek, bird watching, savor a breathtaking view of Lake Michigan on the dunes of Rosy Mound, enjoy a family picnic at Pottawatomie Park after an afternoon of swimming and fishing or peruse the rolling hills, hiking trails, stream and vast open land of Eastmanville Farm.

Families can also choose from a long list of themed festivals throughout the year --- Feast of the Strawberry Moon on Grand Haven's Harbor Island in June, which takes you back to the days of fur trading; Artwalk in August showcasing both local and out-of-state artists and their creations; the Ottawa County Fair in July, the Coast Guard Festival honoring our Coast Guard in July/August; the Salmon Festival with the salmon cook-off in September; Grand Haven's Ice Sculpture displays in February; the Spring Lake Heritage Festival and Holland's Tulip Time Festival in May or enjoy berry picking at numerous self-pick farms across the county, take part in Grand Haven's Worship on the Waterfront on Sunday evenings between Memorial Day and Labor Day, charter a fishing boat to the deep waters of Lake Michigan to land your prize catch then watch as it is professionally cut, deboned and cleaned at Chinook Pier's fish preparation station. There is certainly no time to be bored!

One of our most remarkable historical attractions is the world's largest outdoor musical fountain in downtown Grand Haven with nightly shows from May until September regardless of the weather; you can also enjoy a performance of Dutch dancing, complete with period costumes and authentic wooden shoes, take a carousel ride on the unique Dutch hand-painted carousel or discover the exceptional arts of Dutch shoemaking and flour-making at Holland's Windmill Island.

Another attractive feature of Ottawa County is the availability and quality of education from Young Fives and preschool to university. We have several top-notch, highly rated schools within our boundaries which are recognized across the nation (Grand Haven and Spring Lake High Schools) as well as an acclaimed, well-known university, Grand Valley State University, with one of its main campuses in Allendale right along the shores of the Grand River.

Harbor Transit, the Tri-Cities on-demand bus system serving the communities of Grand Haven, city and township, Spring Lake and Ferrysburg, operates year-round for those offering unique regional services during the summer months such as the scenic tour rides on the Harbor Trolley complete with local historical tidbits as well as regular beach trolleys from several main locations to Grand Haven's City Beach.

Although quite small in size at 1,631.97 square miles (2000 census) and a population of approximately 263,801 (2010 census), there is a multitude of quaint specialty shops and privately owned businesses with merchants whose focus is on an array of unique and fascinating products and services. Our area does thrive on and attract those who dedicate themselves to serving small niches in retail markets – Blueberry Haven, Aluminum Mule, Just For Dogs – while, at the same time, has several larger service and manufacturing industries – Brilliance Audio, Shape, Herman Miller, Hawthorne Manufacturing. This blend of small and large, private and corporate, serves our county well by offering choices, promoting creativity and entrepreneurship while still providing small-town, award-winning customer service all in a relaxed, serene setting. It helps our local economy to be diversified and more stable in difficult times as it does not rely on any one particular service or big industry to be the main financial core in our county. Our businesses not only help the local economy but also strive to keep it in check by serving on local boards, business associations and taking active roles in area events and campaigns to make our place here in Ottawa County a more prosperous and ideal setting to live and play. With so many ultimately unique and magnificent people, places and activities right at your fingertips, it is where many gems can be discovered and priceless memories are made.

For me, however, what really sets Ottawa County apart from other areas in Michigan is the subtle difference in the pace of life from the east side to the west side of the state. This subtle difference found here can best be described as a more casual, tranquil approach and attitude toward everyday life with little of the hustle and bustle often found in larger and more heavily-populated urban centers.

Come for a short visit or put down roots and discover the gems of Ottawa County. *What's not to love about Ottawa County?*