

ROAMING THROUGH MICHIGAN

During week five, I continued work on my sabbatical. I finished the week with a wonderful interview with a couple I know from St. Mary Magdalen. They have always impressed me with their faith and their commitment to serving others, but I was overwhelmed to learn their story about how they had come to peace with past hurts, and despite them, sought to give so generously of themselves. The interview continued on with dinner and then I made my way northward.

After spending my night in the cheapest motel I could find (not my best night's sleep) I got up early, finished typing my notes from the interview and went to the 9 am Liturgy at a large parish about midway up the lower peninsular.

The Liturgy for the 23rd Sunday of the Church Year in a parish larger and more affluent than ours was not very impressive. All the music tended to be ponderous; the opening hymn (All Are Welcome) was only 2 verses long. The presider prayed all the prayers with his arms extended and palms facing the assembly rather than up lifted as if to say: stay away. The lectors did a good job, especially the woman reading the Letter to the Romans; the male cantor seemed to have a good, but untrained voice. The homily was good. He spoke about correcting others and gave 3-4 good examples of how parents lovingly corrected children with the emphasis being on the attitude we should have in making the correction; but he did not offer any words about correcting other adults. The Liturgy had good pauses after the reading and communion. I noticed the ushers were primarily older men with one older woman. In a similar way, most of the communion ministers were older with maybe 2 out of 10 under the age of 65. The assembly responded well and most sang, but the music seemed high and most of it unfamiliar to me. The church which probably sat 1,000 was at about 65.

From there I headed up North to visit with a couple from the parish with whom I still keep contact. We spent most of Sunday and Labor Day morning together, sharing three wonderful, long and leisurely meals. They are both fascinating and thoughtful people and a real joy to add to my interviews.

On Labor Day afternoon I caught the ferry to Beaver Island. There is a family who has had a beautiful cottage on the island since '85 and for probably the last 12 years or so has invited me to use or come and visit them when they are there. After giving an outline for the sabbatical, I received an email asking if this wasn't finally the year to see their little bit of paradise.

So for those who, like me, have never been there, here is a little information I gleaned from Wikipedia:

Beaver is thirteen miles long, three to six miles wide, and forms part of Charlevoix County, Michigan. It is mostly flat and sandy, with large forested tracts. According to U.S. census data, the island has 55.773 square miles of land, and a year-round population of 551. The more densely settled portion, comprising only 6 percent of Beaver's total land area, lies within St. James Township on the northern end. This portion had a 2000 census population of 307 inhabitants. Peaine Township, taking up the remaining 94 percent of the island, contains sizable parcels of state-owned land and is mostly undeveloped. It had a population of 244 inhabitants. The islands in the Beaver Island archipelago include, in rough order of size: Garden Island, High Island, South Fox Island, Hog Island, North Fox Island, Gull Island, Whiskey Island, Squaw Island, Trout Island, Grape Island, Hat Island, Shoe Island, Pismire Island.

Beaver Island has several small to moderately sized lakes including Lake Geneserath in the southeast, Greenes Lake and Fox Lake in the central portion, and Font Lake, Egg Lake, Round Lake, and Barneys Lake in the north. There are only two named streams: Jordan River, draining into Sand Bay on the east side of the island and Iron Ore Creek, draining into Iron Ore Bay on the south side.

Because my hosts had given up their own bedroom for me (I have no clue why since he and I are the same height, but he slept on the hide-a-bed). But as a result of their hospitality, I was treated to waking up to a glorious sunrise! Their bedroom has a sliding glass door with a balcony and the view of the sunrise on a clear day is wonderful. While sunsets are great and very romantic, sunrises are glorious and spiritual moments. So when I woke up, I sat and prayed watching the sun rise.

After a great breakfast, we went for a tour of Beaver Island: one town\illage (St. James), two airports, and two townships. There is only one paved road...King's Highway. It is named after the Mormon whose followers proclaimed him king, James Strang. Here's his story:

James Strang, who would create America's only kingdom on Beaver Island, was born in New York in 1813. He expected great things of himself. He established a law practice at the age of 23, but it failed to satisfy his ambition. When he met Joseph Smith in 1844, he converted to his new evangelical religion as a way of improving his position.

Strang's debating skills impressed the Mormon leader, who assigned him to found a branch in Burlington, Wisconsin. While Strang was away, Smith was killed. Shortly thereafter Strang produced a letter naming him as Smith's chosen heir. He was challenged by Brigham Young, who was more solidly entrenched. Strang led those who accepted him to Nauvoo, Illinois, and then Voree, Wisconsin, before deciding that God wanted him to bring his flock to Beaver Island.

Producing mysterious brass plates from the ground, and receiving directives from God, Strang formed a colony on Beaver Island in 1848. It grew year by year, and soon had the numbers to elect Strang to the state legislature. Trouble with the "gentiles" led to the "War of Whiskey Point", which the Mormons won by firing a canon at the unruly gang gathered at the trading post. By the early 1850s, most of the non-Mormons had left the Island. The ensuing degree of absolute power went to Strang's head, and rumors spread about Mormon atrocities. Strang had himself crowned king, and began taking additional wives. Attempts to oust him by legal means failed, and in 1856 he was assassinated by two disgruntled followers. His people were driven off the Island by an unruly mob from Mackinac Island, which was instigated by speculators eager to grab the land. During their 8-year occupancy, the Mormons cleared and cultivated the ground, built roads and houses, and changed the Island from a wilderness to a moderate outpost of civilization. But fate conspired to keep them from reaping the benefits of their toil.

Beaver Island was blessed to be near some of the best fishing grounds in the world. The Mormons had excluded the gentiles from partaking in this bounty, but once the Mormons were gone, Irish fishermen began to appear. They came from Gull Island, Mackinac Island, various port cities on the mainland, and County Donegal in Ireland. Once they settled in, they wrote to their families and friends about "America's Emerald Isle."

Besides being introduced to the history, geography and topography, my host spoke of his own experience of coming to the island to vacation as a youth. His parents, older brother and sister and uncle's family came to the island in the mid 1950's and rented a cottage for \$35 a week. Since he loves to fish, hunt and boat, it was a wonderful place for him. He bought property on the island in his mid-twenties and he and his wife built a house on the east side of the island in 1985. During the tour, my host showed me the cottage on Lake Geneserath his parents had rented. And my host – mom, dad and youngest child – told me stories of vacations on the island.

On Wednesday, I made my way back to the mainland and did an interview with someone in the course of the two and half hour ride.

Back on shore, I headed down to Traverse City to spend a day with a couple I have known for years, but had little opportunity to see. After a pleasant evening, pad and pen in hand, I interviewed them. The next morning, after breakfast I left for Canada on my route to the Abbey of the Genesee near Geneseo, New York (about forty miles from Rochester, NY and fifty-five miles southeast of Buffalo.)

I arrived at the abbey later in the afternoon of Friday, September 9.

On Sunday, my thoughts were filled with home. I know Fr. Jim and all the staff is taking wonderful care of everything, but I know this 10th anniversary of 9\11 will be difficult for some and my thoughts are especially of you. I am also keenly aware of the fact that this weekend was also the picnic, and for the first time since leaving I can honestly say that I experienced a twinge of home sickness. Just know that you are in my thoughts and prayers here at the Abbey of the Genesee.