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A decade later, 'Best Little Town' still fits Bayfield

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BAYFIELD, Wis. -- There are still no traffic lights. In fact, there are still no traffic lights in the entire county.

There's still no McDonald's, no Wal-Mart. The lake still sparkles, the beaches still squeak, the restaurants still serve those menacing whitefish livers.

"And," says the mayor, "we still don't have a wax museum."

This is still Bayfield.

Ten years ago, the Tribune went on a six-week search to find the Best Little Town in the Midwest. We drove more than 8,000 miles, checked out 139 towns, ate too much good and bad food, and talked to lots of people before settling on a little town on Lake Superior with its neighboring Apostle Islands.

"This," we wrote, "is Bayfield and the Apostles. This is not a rock group. This is paradise."

Ten years later, there's trouble in paradise. You can almost hear Robert Preston now.

"Wellll, either you are closing your eyes to a situation you do not wish to acknowledge, or you are not aware of the caliber of disaster indicated by the presence of . . ."

But first, the mostly good news.

What appealed to us in 1997 is still here.

The town hasn't lost its little-ness. The year-round population was listed as 686 then, and it's 611 now. Losing 10 percent of its year-round population within a decade might startle some people, but doctors ordered Larry MacDonald, in his sixth term as mayor, to avoid startles after a heart attack last year.

"Bayfield's population has been shrinking for a hundred years, as various industries disappeared," he says, calmly. The lumbermen, brownstone cutters and most of the commercial fishers all gradually went the way of the French traders and missionaries, the region's first Europeans, along with the support businesses that kept them fed and supplied and who quenched various thirsts. "And that's not peculiar to northwest Wisconsin."

It remains, as it has been, a haven for boaters and birders. Bicyclists continue to enjoy the quiet back roads. Hiking trails on the mainland and on some of the 22 Apostles continue to challenge and delight. If there's a prettier town park than the one on Madeline Island's Lake Superior shoreline, we didn't find it 10 years ago, nor since.

Pricier, but still beautiful

The artists -- this is a place of creative people -- haven't all been pushed or priced out of town. Not quite yet.

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"Property taxes have skyrocketed," says Dede Eckels, who continues to craft pottery and other good, clay things in the studio her late father opened 47 years ago. "The water bills . . . it's getting more expensive to live in Bayfield. That's the downside.

"The good side: I can continue to make a living. It's still beautiful, and the type of people who choose to be here has not changed. The community is fabulous here."

Restaurants have closed, and restaurants have opened. Restaurants do that everywhere. Happily, the ones we liked best 10 years ago are still around, and at the Egg Toss, you still have to get there before 8 a.m. to avoid a long wait for your Crabby Benny.

Like the restaurants, some B&Bs have come and gone and come. The Old Rittenhouse Inn remains here, gloriously and deliciously. There are more condos facing the water than there were, but they haven't overwhelmed the place. In all, MacDonald says, room numbers and fashion are about what they were.

Ten years ago, the Big Top Chautauqua's summer season featured, among others, Johnny Cash, Arlo Guthrie and Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" road show.

This season, under a new tent (the old one was terminally perforated last year by hailstones), the schedule includes, among others, Willie Nelson, Chad Mitchell and Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" road show.

Too many T-shirts?

And we've stalled long enough.

We're talking T-shirt shops. In Bayfield.

Ten years ago, in a little town of potters and glassblowers and watercolor-ers, there was one shop with T-shirts in the window. A few years later, there were two.

In 2006, someone opened the T-Shirt Factory. And this year, a fourth was opened -- by the same couple who opened the T-Shirt Factory right down the street.

"Which was very disturbing to me," says Eckels.

Oh, we got trouble, my friends. With a capital Tee.

"How can they sell that many T-shirts? They're very nice people," Eckels says, "but that's their thing -- a very low-end, cheap-souvenir mentality."

"It troubles me," says Mayor MacDonald, whose outfitter store sells T-shirts.

"They could take over," says Judith Lokken Strom, who has owned Greunke's, an iconic restaurant-inn, for 32 years -- and sells T-shirts. "That happened in Maui. Three-for-\$10 crap."

"I'm very concerned about the T-shirt thing," says Jerry Phillips, owner of the Old Rittenhouse. "I'm just kind of shocked at that sort of business." The Old Rittenhouse, which sells fleece with its logo, doesn't sell T-shirts. Yet.

Remarkably, well into the current tourist season, none of this angst over repurposed Fruit of the Loom cotton had reached the actual corrupters.

Gali Abutbul, the male half of the pair, was totally flummoxed by the news.

"I'm selling shirts for tourists. So?"

His wife, Angela Vanderveer, is both flummoxed and baffled, particularly that no one had raised the issue with her personally. And if somebody had?

"My response to somebody who would say something like that," she says, "would be, 'OK, we're opening another one next

year."

Then she cooled down.

"We bring revenue into the town. People like our stuff. Why else would we open another store?"

"I don't think T-shirts are killing the town. I think the town is doing pretty darn good."

Especially for some people.

"We're seeing a proliferation of real estate offices," says Phillips. "If you walk down the street now, you'll see them everywhere."

"There were basically two when you were here before, and now there's what? Six? Seven? Maybe eight?"

Good news for sellers. Convenient for buyers. Scary for others.

"It's a paradise," says a woman who works in LaPointe, Madeline Island's only town, a short ferry ride from Bayfield. "That hasn't changed."

"But the rich people come in, the land skyrockets and you can't pay the taxes any longer."

A telling indicator (or maybe just bad timing): A woman who moved here with her husband a couple of years ago to work at the Bayfield Chamber of Commerce wound up buying a house in Washburn, 12 miles away.

"We just couldn't find anything in Bayfield that met our needs when we needed to buy a house," she says.

So most young families who want to enjoy the Bayfield lifestyle and its values -- artistic, simple, green -- are either being priced out of town or are forced to commute.

"Your artists, your musicians, they've all moved over to Washburn, because it's more affordable," says Greunke's Strom. "That house across the street -- 15 years ago you could've bought that house for maybe 40 grand. It sold three years ago for a quarter of a million."

"You don't see young couples coming to town to live." There is no laundry in town anymore. Andy's, the IGA grocery store, is just hanging on. There's talk of the town buying it from the owner, who is near retirement, and operating the store as a co-op, but nothing is set.

Says MacDonald: "We want to make sure we have a grocery store for the future in Bayfield."

'A sense of sacredness'

So Bayfield -- far as it is from civilization (the Twin Cities, nearest metropolitan area, are 4 1/2 hours distant) -- isn't Brigadoon, a mythic village protected forever from the forces, market and otherwise, that affect us all in real life.

But the countryside is still covered with pick-'em orchards and berry patches and with people who create wonderful things from dried flowers.

Lake Superior remains impossibly blue, luring sailors and kayakers and anglers to its challenge, and the rest of us to its moods. Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, with its lighthouses and sea caves and sense of wilderness. The Apple Festival (Oct. 5-7 this year). The hills that slope to this inland sea. The B&Bs, and the artists, and the whitefish livers, and tent shows . . . and a spirituality that many link to the Native Americans who were a presence when the French were swapping hardware for beaver pelts and are a presence here today.

A concentration, taken together, of very interesting, very committed people. Like the tourists who find this place, the locals didn't stumble upon Bayfield on the way to somewhere down the road.

They're here on purpose.

That hasn't changed, not in 10 years, not in 30.

"In a sense," says Eckels, "we live in a bubble here, because the rest of the world is not like this. They don't understand the concept of living with nature in such a beautiful, pristine place.

"There's a sense of sacredness here."

There's certainly something that transcends the normal way we evaluate even little Midwestern towns.

"It's like the hills sort of embrace us," says MacDonald. "You don't see that in the rest of the world.

"It feels like a place you want to be."

Still.

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

By car, 10 years later, Bayfield is still about 460 miles from Chicago, the first 300 on interstate highways. Figure about 8 1/2 hours. You could fly to Duluth, 90 minutes away, and rent a car -- but you won't.

GETTING AROUND

The town itself is little enough to cover on foot, but many of its appealing features -- the orchards and berry patches, some galleries and restaurants, the Big Top Chautauqua -- are a stretch, even by bicycle. You'll need a car. Bikes, mopeds, Harleys and cars all work on Madeline Island; your choice depends on you and where you're based there. Frequent ferries connect the mainland and Madeline Island. Ferries and water taxis can get you to some of the Apostle Islands, or paddle over in a kayak, yours or a rental.

STAYING THERE

There are no chain hotels or motels in Bayfield; nearest is a Super 8 in Washburn, 12 miles away, with more in Ashland, a 23-mile drive -- so we're talking B&Bs, inns, guest rooms, some condos and a couple of small mom-and-pop motels. Rates are for doubles, subject to change and, if they stay open, generally drop after Oct. 15. Queen of the inns is the Old Rittenhouse (one room is \$115, the rest start at \$145; 800-779-2129; www.rittenhouseinn.com), which has lovely rooms in its Victorian original and in other holdings around town, notably Le Chateau Boutin. A pleasant motel on the edge of town, the Seagull Bay (from \$70; 715-779-5558; www.seagullbay.com) is comfortable and friendly, with sweet lake views.

Among the B&Bs, consider the Thimbleberry Inn (from \$149; 800-881-5903; www.thimbleberryinn.com), well north of town but right on the lake. The mayor's B&B is the Cooper Hill House (from \$89; 715-779-5060; www.cooperhillhouse.com). There are many other quality options as standards are generally high -- but with no chains, each has its own personality; check the listings and links on Bayfield's Web site (www.bayfield.org). Best lodging option on Madeline Island is renting a cottage. Inn on Madeline Island (www.madisland.com), a good place to start, has dozens of properties in its portfolio; or try Madeline Island chamber's site (www.madelineisland.com).

DINING THERE

You'll find plenty of Lake Superior whitefish and trout on Bayfield menus, along with the usual burgers and Wisconsin supper-club regulars. For something completely different, there's artsy-cool Wild Rice (715-779-9881), where entrees start at \$26 (a whitefish-trout combo) and rise from there. Even at \$35, try the scallops. But dollar for dollar (and course for course),

it's tough to beat the elegant \$49 five-course dinners at the Old Rittenhouse (800-779-2129). In its second season, Ethel's at 250 (715-779-0293) offers "pizza [very good] & more," the "more" including fettuccine alfredo dotted with whitefish livers. Best view may be from the Portside (715-779-5380). Regulars still find their way to Maggie's (715-779-0293) for great local fish and hints of the tropics; the Egg Toss (715-779-5181) for creative breakfasts; and Greunke's (715-779-5480) for fun food and those perfect livers.

INFORMATION

Bayfield Chamber of Commerce (800-447-4094; www.bayfield.org). Madeline Island Chamber of Commerce (888-475-3386; www.madelineisland.com).

-- Alan Solomon

IN THE WEB EDITION

- For Alan Solomon's video tour of Bayfield, go to chicagotribune.com/bayfield

- For the original stories on selection of Bayfield in 1997 go to chicagotribunecom/bayfield97

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