

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Call of the wild: Galesburg natives retreat from the "rat race."

Kerry and Sandy Furniss Davis, GHS class of '78, are the contented and successful owners of White Iron Beach Resort three miles from Ely, Minn. For those who haven't been there or looked at a map lately, that is on the edge of a wilderness called Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), 50 miles from the Canadian border and about an hour's drive from the imposing Lake Superior. It's what we might call, "seventh heaven."

Kerry's career began in Galesburg as a Prudential insurance agent and sales manager. Next he served four years as an advanced market specialist for Prudential's corporate office in Chicago. Kerry and Sandy and their two little boys lived in Los Angeles for a year as part of a Prudential experiment with a pilot office. They hated it. They were glad to get home and Kerry became a district manager in Tinley Park, a suburb of Chicago. With their boys growing older, Sandy worked for a Prudential office in Oak Brook for two years.

When was the defining moment when they decided to become owners of a resort? "When I figured out life was a rat race and the rats were winning," said Kerry.

Sandy found out what Kerry really wanted to do when they were in the car and Kerry was writing notes. She asked him what he was doing and he answered that he was listing his goals. She glanced over to see the number one goal. "Buy a resort."

"I was having blood pressure problems and it was either this or have a heart attack," said Kerry. "Our families vacationed in this area and other parts of Minnesota and Michigan for years. We had vacationed in Ely for three years. By chance I looked at the business section of the Chicago Tribune, which I never did, and saw a two-line ad with a phone number. I called the number and five weeks later we closed the deal. We didn't buy the place to get rich," said Kerry, "but for a way of life."

The first season in 1995 was tough. Sandy and their three sons couldn't move to the resort that summer and there was a tremendous amount of work to do, catching up with maintenance and learning the business. Kerry wondered what he had gotten into. There are 15 cabins, a lodge, playground, sand volleyball court, a natural beach and a sauna. On hand are two pontoon boats, canoes, paddle boats, row

boats. The cabins sleep from two to 14 people. Kerry provides guide service for canoe trips, hunts for bear, grouse and deer, and runs fishing expeditions, hikes and maintains the physical structure. Sandy runs the housekeeping operation, reservations and whatever else needs to be done. "We help each other," said Sandy. "We cross job description lines often, except for the fish cleaning. I won't learn how to do that."

Running the resort is a family affair. The oldest son, Chad, is 24, married and an architect in Chicago. John, 20, is still in Ely and attends Vermillion Community College, planning to transfer to a four-year college and become a teacher. Taylor is eight and entertains the visiting children like the professional host that he is. Sandy's brother, Bob Furniss, and his two children live in Ely and are part of life at the resort.

Sandy says the people of Ely have been very friendly and accepting of their family. "Ely went from a mining and logging community to nothing," said Kerry, "Now it is tourism."

"This has allowed us to do a lot of things we both like to do," said Kerry. "Building, home improvement, helping people enjoy themselves and be physically active. We've had experiences we never would have had. The job of insurance sales was good to me but insurance clients are not happy, not at their best time." Added Sandy, "Kerry and I see each other all the time, before this we couldn't."

The Davises are proud of the nearly 80 percent repeat business at the resort. "We don't call them guests any more," said Sandy. "They are our friends." Guests come from all over the world—Japan, China, Italy, Australia and all areas of the United States. Families return every year during the same week for reunions, swimming, fishing and hunting and visitors that week or two get acquainted. The Davises plan campfires with music, fish fries and other events but the atmosphere is low key and relaxing. A sea plane arrives every Wednesday at noon for those who want to take a look at the wilderness area from above.

One or the other of the family is always at the lodge ready to help with advice, sell snacks or just visit. The only television set is in the lodge.

The resort is 76 years old and well



established — but the lodge was built in 1917. This week it is being torn down and building begins on a 1,500 square foot (ground floor) two and a half story structure which will include living quarters for the Davises. Their son, Chad, designed and is helping to build the structure, along with other family members and friends.

In each cabin is a notebook where visitors record their activities and feelings about their vacations. These books reveal the importance of Sandy and Kerry and their role as warm and friendly hosts. Along with their fine management, they are the resort. One visitor reports, "Our family enjoys our week here every year; Kerry and Sandy and boys make that happen!"

Another note says, "The resort is the cleanest, most family oriented place we have ever stayed." Another: "The resort just keeps getting better."

Some of the favorite events? "Seeing moose and black bear on the way to Ely,

hiking trails, the International Wolf Center." Of course the notebooks contain the usual fish stories.

"We are continually updating the cabins and going into our eighth year we are making some improvements for the second time," said Kerry. "I'd love to have a permanent campsite, but we are out of space." The Davises' original plan was to run the resort for 20 years. "After the first couple of years Kerry reduced that to 15," Sandy laughed, "but now we are back to the 20-year plan."

Although they work very hard, Galesburg natives Kerry and Sandy Davis are obviously happy with their momentous decision and change in lifestyle.

Check out their web site at www.whiteironbeach.com.

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