

# *Summertime*

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Word Count: 689

In late June my older brother and I sit in chairs on the lawn of a vacation rental in Harbor Springs, Michigan watching his daughters and their husbands put potato salad and baked beans on the picnic table while joking about overdone hot dogs and burgers on the grill. Surveying the scene, my brother muses, “Family--in the end, that’s all that counts, all we really have.”

Family, friends, traditions--things I can count on. In my small Michigan hometown for a family and class reunion, I’m comforted to see that it’s true, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In my small high school class of 59 graduates, most of the remaining 45 manage to show up for our reunion, the largest class turnout at the yearly Alumni Banquet. My classmates and I agree that the connections and caring relationships we built with each other in the sweetness of our youth remain dear to us to this day. We’re like family, and for now anyway, our memories comfort and carry us forward--from kindergarten to the grave.

During my Michigan visits, I can count on fireflies lighting up the summer evening, thunderstorm clouds building nightly in the west, the whistle of the 11 pm Amtrak Wolverine heading for Ann Arbor each night. The Dexter bakery still makes my favorites--soft pretzels and jelly-filled Bismarck’s. The A & W stand still serves ice-cold root beer in frosty glass mugs and 99-cent Coney dogs on Tuesdays. The Catholic Church chimes continue to ring out with regularity and no one seems to be offended. The Huron River meanders through the middle of town along grassy banks beneath maple trees and through the park where I used to bike with a baloney sandwich on white bread and bottle of cola in my basket.

One can still find roadside picnic tables and big-lettered signs advertising “Pasties, Smoked Fish & Mackinaw Island Fudge” in the Upper Peninsula. Farms and barns still stand along back roads next to fields of soybeans. Yes, there are mosquitoes in summer, snow in winter and not many microbreweries, but functioning lighthouses still guide ships in from the Great Lakes and menus still offer whitefish, perch and walleye.

Back home in our little towns on the Oregon coast, summer has finally arrived, and like many

grandparents with grandkids far afield, I try to cram a summer's worth of living into a week's visit with my three- and four-year old grandsons. We fly kites and build sandcastles on the beach, then wolf down Mudd hot dogs. We rent a powerboat at Jetty Fishery Marina and cruise Nehalem Bay. We gather on the sidelines for the Manzanita 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. Where else can you see 10,000 cheering folks, seemingly there just for you? We hunt the illusive fish at Nedonna Lake, Nehalem River and Lake Lytle.

*Am I catching anything Dad?*

*No, but it's lookin' good honey. Real good, the fish are jumpin'.*

*Are they jumpin' on my hook dad?*

We take nature walks and search for hidden treasures in Nana's forest. We make homemade lemonade and smores, bake mini pizzas in a solar oven we've made from a cardboard box. A visit to the Tillamook Air Museum and Cheese Factory fill our week to overflowing, and we top it off with an Oregon Coast Scenic Railway ride from Rockaway Beach to Garibaldi. People drive by the train honking their horns and waving. It's almost as good as the parade.

By week's end, we gather round the family table for strawberry shortcake. The adults play a game of *Taboo* and we laugh till our sides hurt. The boys laugh at our laughter. On the last day of their visit, the grandsons are more fascinated with climbing Nana's ladder to her loft than flying daddy's remote-controlled helicopter. Before leaving, they have one last fencing battle with the dried up leek stalks on Nana's counter. As their car pulls away heading to the airport, I see little hands waving out the window and hear music to my ears: "I love you Nana."

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