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10-29-2008

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Haenicke, Diether, "Up North, the woods are beautiful, and they help screen out the election" (2008). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 51.

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Up North, the woods are beautiful, and they help screen out the election

By Diether Haenicke
October 29, 2008

I love Michigan.

Earlier this month, I treated myself to a week Up North to view the fall colors. Granted, the fall season is beautiful in many parts of our country. I traveled through New Mexico one year and got drunk on the pure gold of the aspen trees shining in the dimming October sun.

And then the New England states in the fall! Scene after scene from Maine to New Hampshire fill the pages of souvenir calendars with picturesque, quaint villages nestled in hills that seem to be aflame in colors. But for me fall colors and the breathtaking beauty of maple, ash and birch trees along harvested fields and country roads spells Michigan, and I trek Up North every chance I get when the weather report promises sunshine and fall colors.

This year we caught it just right. The sun was out to greet us every single day. The colors were at their peak. The gas prices were down. The stock market went south, and I did not even want to glance at the numbers. A perfect week to be at Crystal Mountain and look at beautiful hills and valleys, ride down rolling country roads, eat whitefish on the water in Leland, hike the Sleeping Bear Dunes, or sit at the banks of the Benzie River and watch the leaves fall in the afternoon sun.

We had rented a comfortable house at the edge of civilization, very remote and very quiet. Woods all around. We were at first uncomfortable with the absolute quietness of our surroundings and the absence of curtains on most windows. City folk are that way. They don't like darkness to stare into their house at night, and they have forgotten how good it feels to sit at the window and watch the world around them change the shape and color of all things as the evening leads gently into the night.

I feel at home Up North. Our rental was close to Beulah, where my late friend, the fine Michigan artist Gwen Frostic, lived much of her life creating stunning but delicate images of leaves, bushes, trees and Michigan wildlife. Her eye saw the endless beauty in the smallest of things and through her art she continues to live.

The small towns Up North don't offer much in terms of entertainment in the fall. The summer visitors have left and with them the many waitpersons who are back in college hitting the books. The resorts are preparing for the winter skiers. The summer festivals are over; but the Interlochen radio station keeps broadcasting its program of classical music, and my meanderings along Lake Michigan through the vividly colored woods on my way to Cross Village were appropriately accompanied by Haydn, Mozart, and Vivaldi.

I am always charmed by the small town public libraries in the area. Beulah has its own, a well-kept old building with wireless Internet access. A flock of old geezers with laptops on their knees and fur caps on their heads sat in the cold autumn dusk on the front porch of the library connecting to the world before night could fall. The friendly librarian denied me a library card, but directed me to several cartons of donated books for sale -- detective and love stories that are certainly not challenging reading, but comfort food for the mind.

As we drove through the back woods and sparsely populated hinterlands, we quietly counted the many campaign signs along the roads. I expected many more Republican posters back here off the beaten track. But while the McCain posters, according to our visual survey, appeared to outnumber the Obama placards, both were very much in evidence.

Away from the shrill voices of the campaign and away from television, Up North was also a good place to regain some perspective on the national election. The woods and the countryside screen out much of the zeal with which this campaign is being fought. Two candidates, both honorable men, but with vastly different life experiences and politics, vie for our vote. In a few days we shall know. And then we shall have to forget partisanship and link hands to build our future together in a state and a country that gives to us so abundantly.

This column was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette mlive.com/kalamazoo