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An old railroad station has become the Little Traverse History Museum in Petoskey, Mich. It houses a permanent exhibit on author Ernest Hemingway.

Visit Northern Michigan for the Hemingway tour

Family had vacation home in Petoskey; early stories set in area

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Chicago Tribune

PETOSKEY, Mich. — “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another,” wrote Ernest Hemingway in “The Sun Also Rises.”

For much of his early years, the novelist didn’t move much beyond Oak Park, where he was born, and Northern Michigan, where his family had a vacation cottage. Far from getting away from himself, his experiences there figure into his earliest writing.

Walk around the resort town of Petoskey, and you’ll see markers on buildings with a Hem history: the barber shop where he got a shave and a haircut (now a pet store) and the former boarding house where he lived and wrote. You can drink in the bar where he was a fixture (second stool on the left). Out in the countryside he loved, you can buy a souvenir or a sandwich at the general store he frequented. The church where Hemingway married the first of his four wives once stood on the vacant lot next door.

DIY or guided tour

Do-it-yourselfers can take a walking and driving tour of Hemingway sites, but a guide from Petoskey Yesterday will load you up on this local celebrity’s lore. The Michigan Hemingway Society keeps tabs on all things related to the novelist and invites visitors to lectures and other events during its conference in Petoskey every October. In July, a documentary on his Michigan boyhood premieres and a statue of young Hem will be dedicated in a Petoskey park.

Hemingway made his first trip up north at age 3 months, traveling with his family to their cottage on Walloon Lake. The Hemingways were among many well-to-do urban dwellers who trekked to the Petoskey area to escape the heat and pollution of industrial metropolitan areas in the early 1900s. It ranked among the premier vacation spots of Northern Michigan, with Victorian inns, a vaudeville theater and four cigar manufacturers.



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Hemingway volunteered with the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I. He was wounded by shrapnel.

Ringed Little Traverse Bay a half-hour south of the Straits of Mackinac, Petoskey and neighboring resort communities continue to be go-to vacation spots. Chicagoans might compare it to Lake Geneva, Wis., for its gracious old homes, golf courses, waterfront resorts and an energized downtown beckoning with boutiques and galleries.

But it has something Lake Geneva doesn’t: Hemingway heritage.

Born July 21, 1899, Hemingway spent part of every year in the Petoskey area. Windemere, the family’s Walloon Lake cottage where he spent much of his boyhood, became a national landmark in 1968. It remains in the Hemingway family and off-limits to tourists.

But you can drive through the hamlet of Walloon Lake — don’t blink; it has fewer than 500 people — and go fly fishing in Horton Creek, one of Hem’s favorite trout streams. The Horton Bay General Store, where he loitered as a boy and young man, still stands. Built in 1876, it’s now a summers-only catchall: restaurant, liquor store, tapas bar, beer garden, bed-and-breakfast and gift shop brimming with Hemingway photos, memorabilia and

antiques. Its old crank telephone still works.

These and other locations turn up in the author’s earliest short stories featuring the Hemingway-like main character Nick Adams. Though the places usually aren’t referred to by name, the Michigan Hemingway Society finds connections. Mr. Packard’s store in “The Last Good Country” seems inspired by the general store, and a stream similar to Horton Creek pops up several times in “Summer People.”

Society President Chris Struble, who runs the Petoskey Yesterday Hemingway tours, said young Hem changed after his service as a Red Cross ambulance driver in Italy during World War I. He returned to Northern Michigan with 237 shrapnel wounds and a broken heart. The nurse he fell in love with in Italy and planned to marry sent him a “Dear Ernie” letter. Only 19, he would later write in “A Farewell to Arms,” “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

But Hemingway was not yet the novelist who would claim a Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize for Literature more than three decades later. He struggled, without much success, during the winter of 1919-1920 while a boarder at Eva Potter’s Rooming House in Petoskey. As now it’s a private residence, Hemingway fans must content themselves with reading the plaque on the front lawn and staring up at the second-floor window where he might have sat gazing while waiting for his muse to strike.

Lots of distractions

His productivity wasn’t helped by a steady stream of pals who came around and distracted him. According to local lore, he hid out in a small room in Evelyn Hall, a shuttered women’s dormitory at Bay View, a Methodist retreat on the Chautauqua circuit. Jane Addamsspoke there. Drive by to admire the steamboat Victorian structure that served as a summer home for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union — amusing given that Hemingway was no teetotaler.



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A young Hemingway was a regular at the Horton Bay General Store.

If you go

Petoskey Area Visitors Bureau: 800-845-2828, petoskeyarea.com.

Self-guided tour of Hemingway’s Michigan: mihemingwaytour.com.

Guided Hemingway tours: Petoskey Yesterday, 90-minute walking tour, \$15; two-hour driving tour into the countryside, \$20; 517-290-3162, petoskeyyesterday.com.

On Hemingway’s 21st birthday, his mother ordered him out of the family cottage in what Struble called an “overdraft letter.” She reasoned he’d done nothing with his life, certainly not pursued a career in medicine like his father, and was drawing on the family’s name but not giving back. Hem also had become quite a drinker and attracted too much attention from the young female visitors staying in the area’s summer cottages.

He hung out in the Noggin Room Pub of what is now Stafford’s Perry Hotel, built the year he was born and the last of Petoskey’s original grand hotels still in business. A short stagger away, Hemingway’s famous face hangs above the 32-foot-long solid mahogany bar in the City Park Grill, where he played billiards and watched bare-knuckle boxing matches in the park across the street. Imagine the stories he told from his favorite spot, second stool from the front door.

The Little Traverse Historical Museum, housed in a former railroad station built in 1892, displays a permanent collection of materials on Hemingway’s days in Northern Michigan.

His story will come to life July 21, his birthday, when “Young Hemingway & His Enduring

Eden” premieres in Petoskey. The documentary will air on PBS in two segments next year, according to the Michigan Hemingway Society. The screening takes place after a Hemingway-inspired four-course dinner at Stafford’s Perry Hotel, which is hosting the third annual Ernest Hemingway Birthday Celebration at 5:30 p.m. (tickets cost \$65; call 231-347-4000). Earlier that day, a bronze statue of young Hem will be dedicated in Petoskey at Pennsylvania Park.

Save the date for the Hemingway society’s fall conference Oct. 6-8 featuring author Steve Paul, whose new book, “Hemingway at Eighteen: The Pivotal Year That Launched an American Legend,” is due out this fall. Visitors are welcome to attend many of the Hemingway-related events.

Walking around Petoskey and the countryside where Hemingway spent his youth, you imagine what he saw, how he lived and how it might have shaped his view of the world. In an early version of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” Hemingway wrote: “Of the place where he had been a boy he had written well enough. As well as he could then.”

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Walloon Lake, the site of the Hemingway family cottage, is where the author spent a lot of time during his early years.



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Hemingway patronized the Noggin Room Pub in what is now Stafford’s Perry Hotel in Petoskey.



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The antiques-filled Horton Bay General Store serves breakfast and lunch, as well as tapas on weekends.