



# At Home in Harbert

CHICAGO TRANSPLANT LOVES HER BED-AND-BREAKFAST LIFE

Nancy Watson not only has made a new life and home for herself in Southwest Michigan, she's making it for others – albeit temporarily – at her bed-and-breakfast in the lakeshore community of Harbert.

“I like meeting so many interesting people and helping them relax and enjoy their vacation here,” she said. “It’s fun to make new friends each week.”

In business for a year, Watson has settled quickly into the Harbert community she now calls home.

“I wanted to downsize and still get to be a creative,” she said. “I love having people here, and bed-and-breakfast inns attract friendly people.”

Located on an acre and a half lot on Prairie Road just a short distance off Red Arrow Highway, Harbert House can be found in a quiet neighborhood where people can get away and surround themselves with nature. The home's back yard borders a prairie, and Lake Michigan beaches are just a 20-minute walk away.

“If they want, people can just sit back and watch the deer and birds in the back yard or go outside and lay in the hammock or play a game of croquet,” she said. “We’re pretty lucky here to

have this kind of view.”

Harbert is perhaps still best known as the home of poet and author Carl Sandburg, who lived here for 15 years during the time period he was writing his biography of President Abraham Lincoln.

Today, the quaintness he enjoyed can still be found along with the unique restaurants, art galleries, shops and antique malls that dot the roads running through Southwest Michigan's Harbor Country.

Watson sees her new life as combining the best of both worlds. She's been able to get away from the hustle and bustle and fast-paced lifestyle of her previous career as a caterer, while her role as innkeeper allows her to continue to make use of her culinary talents and love of cooking.

She offers a hot breakfast each morning and wine and hors d'oeuvres each afternoon. As she puts it, she offers “sweet dreams” and “delectable cuisine.”

“I try to have unique menus,” she said. “Breakfast gives me a chance to put on my gourmet hat.”

She tries to use local produce in her cooking whenever

possible and loves to make delectable desserts such as cinnamon chocolate nut bundt cake, pineapple upside-down cake and blueberry buckle for her guests.

She does all the cooking herself and has help with some of the cleaning. “


Compared to running a full-service catering company in Chicago, this feels like a vacation,” she said. “I have time to enjoy the country myself.”

She first started thinking about opening a B&B three or four years before she took the plunge and moved to this side of the lake. She had visited here before and liked the area.

“I knew lots of people who had second homes here or who were used to coming here,” she said. “It’s just a charming area. For myself, I was looking for something different to do. It wasn’t a matter of scaling down exactly, but definitely dialing down.”

She sees the Harbor Country area as perfect for both her and her guests.

“It’s close enough to Chicago for people to come for a weekend, but it’s also so different than Chicago,” she said. “The beaches here are less crowded; it’s a night and day difference.”



► The Gallery room at the Harbert House Bed & Breakfast.

WRITTEN BY: DEBRA HAIGHT  
PHOTOS BY: JOHN MADILL

Her life in Chicago for the past 25 years involved establishing her catering business in Morton Grove, Nancy S. Watson Cook Inc., which took her all over the city and the suburbs. Before that, she spent eight years as a school teacher in the Chicago public schools.

“I taught school, and I would dissipate my frustrations by cooking,” she said. “I loved it, it became my passion, and I knew I had to do that. I’m still happiest when I’m in the kitchen ... Food is really important to me, so I try to make it stand out.”

She thinks many people are looking for the friendly atmosphere that can be found in a bed-and-breakfast when they want to get away for vacation.

“A typical bed-and-breakfast is very nice and social,” she said. “It’s for people who want a homelike atmosphere rather than a sterile hotel.”

“People want a unique experience – the lodging on the interstates are all the same. You could be here, Georgia or Arizona, and they’ll all be the same. Beds-and-breakfasts and small inns are so unique; each has its own personality.”

She’s found that what drew her to Harbert also draws other