

# Clare County

*blending the old with the new*



## *Northern Outings*

*By Erin Fanning*

Clusters of white clouds settled into an eggshell blue sky like sugar-sand beaches dotting an immense sea. Against this pastoral background, colorful quilts, one matching the blue of the sky, stretched along a clothesline. The quilts blew in the wind, threatening to escape the clothes pins that held them in place and tumble across a nearby parking lot.

A few paces away sat a black buggy, and a man, with an equally black suit and a long, scruffy beard, munching on a sandwich. Handmade baskets with red-and-blue stripes intertwined in their patterns nestled among the quilts. One of the many Amish that reside in Clare County, the roadside vendor somberly nodded his head in greeting as I walked, carefully wheeling my bicycle, through his rows of baskets. As I pedaled away from the Amish crafts, a quilt flapped in the wind as if chastising me for leaving it behind.

Across the street and about a block back, a sign read, "Welcome to Clare." The black buggy and Amish crafts were the perfect introduction to Clare County, a place where history seems to meld with the modern world. It was history, in a sense, that had brought me to Clare.

Unfurling like a black ribbon, the historic Pere-Marquette Rail-Trail had lured my husband Keith and me to the area. Following the path of the old Flint and Pere Marquette Railroad, the 30-mile non-motorized pathway runs from Clare to Midland. It rambles through small rural communities and past numerous parks, offering cyclists, inline skaters, and walkers hours to days of exploration.

Earlier that day, we had pedaled from the Clare trailhead, about one mile from downtown, and headed south. We passed fertile farms, interrupted by the occasional cluster of dark green pines, and cycled with a brisk wind, clipping mile after mile with little effort. After cycling through the small town of Coleman, where a historic train depot had been converted into a restaurant, the landscape altered. The flat farm fields were left behind and the trees thickened, drawing closer.

Turning off the pathway, we stopped at the 19-acre Arbutus Bog and followed a wide boardwalk a short distance into the wetlands. Leaning back on a wooden bench, we surveyed the marshy area, while behind us tall plants scratched at the boardwalk with wind-assisted, finger-like leaves. In the spring, the area blooms with leatherleaf's small, white bell-like flowers and chokeberry's showier white blossoms. During late summer cotton grass display fluffy white heads. Hunting hawks are a common sight in the bog, as well as bluebirds.

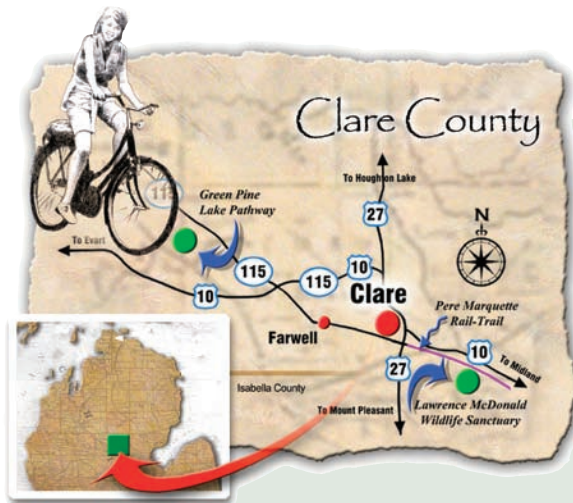
Back on our bicycles, we skirted the Veterans Memorial Park and its 180-year-old white and red pines just before crossing the Tittabawassee River in Sanford. About 3 miles from the rail-trail in Sanford (and well worth the detour) sits the 325-acre Pine Haven Recreation Area.

The area offers about 8 miles of rolling, twisting hiking and mountain biking trails. On an earlier trip to Pine Haven, I pedaled along the banks of a gully with steep, off-cambered climbs and hopped over logs. Later, after climbing out of the gully, the trail flattened, and I cruised through the woods, crossing over dry creek beds. At the end of the trail, feeling like a kid in a candy store, I nodded my head in agreement when Keith asked if I was up for another loop.

Worn out by our current ride, however, we decided that a visit to Pine Haven would have to wait for another day. We turned around in Sanford and slogged the 20 miles back to Clare against an unsympathetic wind. The slower pace brought the landscape a crisp clarity. In front of a white, paint-peeling farm house, a man rode behind a lawn mower while nearby a young boy darted around the perfectly groomed green lawn. In the shadows next to a red barn stood a black carriage.

Later, I paused at the 11-acre Lawrence McDonald Wildlife Sanctuary and scanned its wetlands but all was still. I pedaled through the sanctuary on a grassy, bumpy pathway, which spit me out at a dirt road. Even though the sanctuary was mostly open field, it seemed unreachable, almost untouched by man. Continuing on the rail-trail, I heard a crow call, the only sound that broke through the rushing wind, and then suddenly I was back at the trailhead with Clare's city streets unfolding around me.

We pedaled through Clare's side streets and within minutes we were at the Doherty Hotel, our home for



## Traveler's Notes

For more information about Clare County contact the Convention & Visitors Bureau at 1-800-233-1359 or visit their website at [www.clarecounty.com](http://www.clarecounty.com). Pere-Marquette Rail-Trail maps are also available through the Visitors Bureau

or at [www.lmb.org/pmrt](http://www.lmb.org/pmrt). Call 989-832-6870 or check out [www.co.midland.mi.us/parks/ph-main.htm](http://www.co.midland.mi.us/parks/ph-main.htm) for information about the Pine Haven Recreation Area. The Doherty Hotel can be found at [www.dohertyhotel.com](http://www.dohertyhotel.com) or by calling 1-877-236-4378.

the weekend. Our room was located in the older section of the hotel, and although a little worn around the edges, it held the charm that only a historic landmark hotel offers. An enormous bouquet burst from a coffee table in the lobby, where cathedral ceilings and dark-wood paneling evoked an older era.

As we checked in, several white-haired bridge players, in for a weekend tournament, milled around the lobby. The open door of a conference room revealed tables of unsmiling card players concentrating on their game. Murals painted in the 1930s decorated the hotel's Leprechaun Lounge, and a plaque reading "Welcome to Hotel Doherty, established 1924, Pride O' Irish," declare its ethnic roots.

Along with the Amish, the Irish also boast a history with Clare County. Irish immigrants named the area in the early 1800s, and Clare's Annual Irish Festival in March celebrates the county's heritage. Across the street from the Doherty Hotel, the Leprechaun Shop continues the Irish theme. Imported cookies, jewelry, linens, and china line the store's shelves.

Soon, however, the pull of the outdoors proved too strong, and we ventured to the Green Pine Lake Pathway, a short drive from downtown Clare over rolling, deeply

forested hills. An old, overgrown campground sets the tone for this brushy trail that begs for more hikers and bikers to tame its wild vegetation. The rugged 8-mile trail (shorter loops are possible), crosses through marshy areas using small bridges and boardwalks. Route-finding can be challenging, particularly in the middle of the pathway, and trail users must occasionally clamber over logs. Yet, the pathway is a wonderful escape, where herons hide among tall weeds and observant hikers witness nature's hidden world.

The sun was just setting as we returned to Clare and dusk caressed the earth, filling it with a delicate light. We continued through town and followed a self-directed Amish tour, recommended by the Clare County Convention & Visitors Bureau. A portly man dressed in a black suit stood in front of a buggy, and he lifted his hand as our diesel truck rumbled by. The man melted into the background as we turned a corner, and a small airplane, a black speck in the sky, buzzed overhead.

On a rolling dirt road, where sturdy stone houses successfully hid their age, a street sign warned to be aware of horses and carriages. We passed several neat white farm houses with their tell-tale buggies parked in the driveways. Across the street from one

of these farms about a dozen deer feasted on a green field.

A girl, her hair hidden by a black scarf, worked a farm field with a horse-drawn plow, while behind her the sun glowed red, rushing from the sky. As we returned to Clare, several people bounded along in a buggy pulled by two trotting horses. The passengers waved at us and behind them a car's headlights blinked on.

As we pulled into the Clare city limits, the white cloud islands from earlier joined together, and they streaked across the sky like a fishermen's net, slowly gathering the moon and stars. Fast-food signs signaled our return, and on the hill where I had seen him earlier the Amish vendor stored away his wares. The old blended with the new: what Clare County does to perfection. 🍷

*Erin Fanning is a freelance writer. She splits her time between the woods and lakes of northern Michigan and the mountains of central Idaho.*

*Illustration by Rod Lawrence.*