

David McGrath: Yes, Thomas Wolfe, you can go home again (provided it's the Midwest)



David McGrath's granddaughter Summer, from right, her mother, Janet, and his daughter Jackie float on Lake Namakagon in Wisconsin. (Family photo)

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It was still there, attached to an oak tree and glowing in the sun.

I had walked down to the shore of the lake cabin in northwest Wisconsin where my family and I had spent 28 summers. We sold it, reluctantly, in 2013 and had returned this August for a family reunion. And to revisit the past.

American novelist Thomas Wolfe famously warned against that very thing in his 1940 book "You Can't Go Home Again," about the difficulty of returning to your origins.

Yet here we were, my wife, Marianne, my three children and their families, trying to harmonize our happy memories of Moose Lake and Bluegill Lake, where my children learned to swim, explored the woods and water, and encountered wildlife, with what we were seeing now.

It is no longer the same. Trees were cut. The woodshed I built was gone. Framed black-and-white photos of the lumberjack days in Old Hayward that we hung on the porch were removed. A new two-story addition partially blocked the view of the lake.

My daughter Jackie and her husband, Gene, walked with me down to the shore. I felt the disillusionment that Wolfe implied.

But then I saw the brass plaque affixed to the tree by the water. The one we had inscribed 30 years ago:

*Biff: 1987-1996. A good dog and a great friend.
Wild and free, he ruled these woods and waters.
Gentle and true, he ruled our hearts.
We grew quiet, standing before the oak.*

Just a puppy when we brought him up for our second year in Wisconsin, the black Lab became our children's protector and constant companion outdoors. His life, we associated with all those years up north.

I wanted to tell Jackie and Gene how soothing it was that the Mackenthuns, the Indiana family that bought our cottage, had kept the memorial. But for a moment, I couldn't speak. I wanted to explain how brass tarnishes over time and that they obviously were maintaining it. That although they met us just once, they respected the meaning we attached to this place. And I felt I was home again.

That's how it went the rest of that first week in August while we stayed nearby at Garmisch Resort on Lake Namakagon. Lots of things, superficial things, we found had changed over the years. But not what was essential to our hearts.

Like the first full day when eight of us hiked Copper Falls State Park, and I told them the story of the first time, when Marianne and I underestimated the trail, and I had to struggle to carry our 1-year-old son, Michael, and his stroller up and down a rocky path advertised as 2 miles but which felt like 10.



David McGrath's wife, Marianne, left, and daughter Jackie perch on the family's unfinished cabin during construction in 1986 in northwestern Wisconsin. (Family photo)

That day in August, however, Mike led the way, now a doctor and mountaineer who flew in from out West for the reunion. When he said he remembered being carried, I did not doubt his childhood recollection inspired by the ancient, spectacular falls that were exactly the same today as back in 1975 — and 75,000 years ago.

Or like Garmisch Resort, which opened in 1904, showing its age: smelly water. Outdated plumbing fixtures. Temperamental air conditioning on the hottest days of the year. Of course, we knew this ahead of time but opted for the vintage experience, like the person who buys a classic 1957 Chevy then regrets the mushy seats and no cruise control.

But Namakagon, whose Ojibwe name means “place of the sturgeon,” remains unchanged from its formation thousands of years ago when the glaciers receded. Our entire party boated across its clear, cool waters to an isolated beach for a picnic and a swim. My children from Florida, Arizona and Illinois caught up and reconnected with one another while lolling for hours in inner

tubes, while our granddaughter Summer searched for minnows, frogs and “perfect” sticks along the shore, as her mother did at the same age.

At week’s end, we drove deep into the woods to Trap N’ Fish Lodge, former home of Joe and Honey Donaghue, our first Northwoods neighbors, who frequently came to our rescue during our early struggles with nature, from mice to mud to bats and bears.

Joe is gone. Honey, we learned, is in assisted living. The lodge was sold, and the hundreds of hats that festooned the cathedral ceiling, including one I donated, disappeared. As we entered the front door with longtime friends Terry and Jane from Bluegill Lake, rock music blasted from speakers that used to croon with ballads by George Jones and Patsy Cline. Had it been earlier in the week, we might have turned around.

But new owners Shauna and Drew gave us a warm welcome. They were clearly well liked by the locals who filled up the dining area — Northland natives notoriously finicky about Wisconsin’s traditional Friday fish fry. They turned the music way down, and we watched as they and their staff of two worked hard and happily to serve everyone.

And if there was any doubt they would perpetuate the generous, good-natured neighborliness of the Donaghues, Shauna, whom we just met, invited us to return to the Trap on Sept. 15 to join their relatives, neighbors and other customers at the Trap for their wedding reception!

Midwestern authors Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Willa Cather are usually ranked ahead of Asheville, North Carolina’s Wolfe for literary merit. Not that Wolfe’s dictum was totally off the mark. But he failed to factor in the kindness and sincerity of people from the heartland.