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Our New Lives

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Jennifer (on the far left) with Sister Marie Eugene and her first grade class on the first day of school

The day after my daughters and I arrived on Beaver Island, in the fall of 1978, I had to get my oldest enrolled in the First Grade. The little community school was staffed mainly by Catholic nuns, who stayed in the convent during the school year, but were away when school was not in session. There had been no one there to help me with arrangements during any of our four visits to the island that summer, so it all had to be done right away.

I started with a telephone call to the convent. Sister Mary Rock, the principal, set a time to meet us at the school. Jennifer would be in Sister Marie Eugene's room. For the first semester, grades one, two and three shared the teacher and the classroom. When the second semester started, the

kindergarten class would be added. Though kindergarten was only one semester long, the students performed well. Jennifer had excelled in every area in kindergarten at Schickler School. Here, we found she was two readers behind. She was also going to have to catch up in Spanish, which they didn't introduce at the kindergarten level in Lapeer!

Finished with the enrollment process, our next stop was the Shamrock Bar and Restaurant. I had secured a job there, and needed to let them know when I'd be available to start work. I was given a couple uniforms – two sizes too large and of horrid mint green polyester – and a schedule. Though I had never been a waitress before, no training was offered. “You'll be fine,” the owner told me, “just keep smiling!”

Next, we stopped in to see Carol LaFreniere. She had agreed to take care of my girls when I was working and to see that Jen got to and from school safely. Carol was a pleasant woman with a keen sense of humor and three little red-headed children. My girls had met her on one of our summertime visits, so there were no surprises. I shared my schedule with her and discussed any possible problems. We were ready!

At the farmhouse, we walked the fields. I kept the lawn mowed. We ate our meals together at the big table in the kitchen. We washed our clothes with the wringer washer, and hung them out on the clothesline to dry. We read together every evening.

On warm days, we gravitated toward the water, that year more than any other. On the beach at Iron Ore Bay, the day before my husband was set to come to the island, we piled sand into giant letters that spelled out, “Welcome, Daddy!” After he arrived, on one beautiful October day, we went back there for a day-long outing. We brought picnic fare, and built a bonfire to cook fish fillets and vegetables all wrapped in individual foil packets. We wandered the beach, finding shells and stones. When the air, toward evening, was getting cooler, the water felt perfect. We all swam, at dusk, then wrapped up in towels and blankets around the fire. We drove back to the farmhouse under a sky full of stars.

Jennifer did well in the new school. She caught up quickly with the lessons; she made friends. Both Jen and Kate did fine at Carol's house. My husband started work right away, and seemed to like it. As for me and the Shamrock, well...that's a story all on its own!