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## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF MERCER, WI**

**BY CABLE, WI COMMITTEE**

Prior to our visit, one of our members called the Mercer Chamber of Commerce office. The person answering was friendly, knowledgeable and helpful. Within a week we had received a packet of information which fairly and accurately reflected the town and greatly helped us as we planned our visit. We also, quite easily found information on the town and region from online web sites and state tourist offices.

On the day of our visit, August 11<sup>th</sup>, we made the mistake of ignoring "road closed" signs on Hwy FF and approached the town from that direction. (The sign did say "open to local traffic"!) Coming in from that side it was difficult to tell when we actually entered the town. The first few buildings we saw were definitely looking "economically depressed". However as we drove up and down Hwy 51 and back and forth through several residential areas we got a much more balanced view of the town. Even on Hwy 51, however, we still had a hard time deciding where the town limits were. None of us ever spotted an official sign. On the whole, our initial impression was that the town was larger than we expected and had a very quaint and interesting downtown area.

Our first stop was at your incredible library and community center. What beautiful buildings! We were all impressed by the beauty, functionality and comfort offered by the facility and the friendliness and helpfulness of its staff. We also noted the nearby park, with playground and ball diamond, etc for the kids.

Our next stop was at the chamber office. This was a good guess on our part as nowhere on the building or sign out front did the words "chamber" or "visitor center" appear. The office was well furnished with informational materials and interesting displays. Unfortunately, the woman on duty was busy on the phone the entire 15 - 20 minutes we looked around, although she did interrupt her conversation long enough to ask if we needed any help and to suggest several possibilities where we might have lunch.

Taking one of her suggestions, we stopped for lunch at one of the downtown taverns. We all enjoyed an excellent meal and an informative conversation with the bartender about the ups and downs of the weather related tourist business, a situation we can commiserate with fully. After lunch we strolled around the downtown area, checking out the shops and visiting your great little museum. The people we met were all very friendly, especially the lady in the museum. On the down side, many of the downtown buildings were vacant or in run down condition. There did not seem to be any cohesive theme in styles of architecture or decoration. There were no flowers, flags or banners to brighten up the light poles, no signs of any intentional streetscape or landscape planning, no benches or fountains to make the area more pedestrian appealing.

We were favorably impressed with the overall variety of goods and services available in the town. In addition to every town's obligatory grocery, hardware, lumber yard and tourist gift shops, there appeared to be many other goods and services offered. We were especially impressed with the several medical clinics located in town. Mercer is very

fortunate to have that level of service in a town of its size. We noted a three bay ambulance hall as well, which speaks to a good health care response level.

With the exception of the large lumber mill in the center of town, there was no obvious sign of industry in town. A local real estate agent told us about a designated industrial park which as yet is still vacant. With the abundance of commercial land and existing, vacant commercial buildings as well as access to town water and sewer, there is good potential for future development. The biggest challenges would be in finding and holding trained labor. Many in the community are seasonal residents and/or retiree's. The best and brightest of the young tend to move to larger metro areas. There is not much available in rental housing to assist in luring in a labor force.

In general, the housing in the area seemed to be a good mix of older and newer single family homes. There were several homes showing signs of recent or ongoing remodeling and up-grading. We noted at least one subsidized, senior apartment complex. Postings at various realty offices showed a good mix of on and off water houses and lots, at prices comparable to those in similar areas around the state. Again, not too much available in rental property other than seasonal cabins and resorts. We were, however, impressed to find a K-12 school right in town and a good mix of churches. These buildings all looked well kept which means they are receiving adequate support from the community. We also noted postings indicating that at least one of these churches is hosting a food pantry for those in need. Local brochures also listed many civic and nonprofit organizations for the good of the community. Local bulletins advertised many fund raising events, festivals and fairs.

The area has much to offer in the way of recreation. There are three lakes right in town, a plentitude of summer and winter trail systems, an 18 hole golf course, a 9 hole mini golf course, and several restaurants. The town and surrounding area also host numerous events to help draw people to the area. All the people we met were friendly, knowledgeable, pragmatic about their town but with a quiet sense of pride in it also.

The five most positive things we observed in the town of Mercer were: beautiful lakes, friendly people, a fantastic library, outstanding medical care, and the Big Loon!

The five biggest obstacles or challenges facing Mercer in our estimation are: the weather dependant tourist business, filling vacant downtown buildings, renovation of existing structures, beautification of the downtown area, and more help at the chamber office.

What single thing will we remember most about this community? The BIG LOON of course!

What one idea will we borrow for use in our community? We would like to develop a historical museum as good as yours.

Respectfully submitted by the Cable visiting team of: Dan Malesevich, Mary Schulz, Noreen Wacholz and Bud Wacholz.