

# Retail follows city vacationers

MICHIGAN from Page 39

1,800, was mostly dark, marked by boarded-up storefronts that reflected the woes of local manufacturers that were downsizing. But in recent years a storm of tourists and second-home owners has granted the local economy a rebirth. Entrepreneurs such as Victoria Burneikis, owner of French Twist, have set up little shops with a sophisticated cachet, at great variance with the old-timers who still live in small cottages and on farms in this rural enclave.

## SPREAD-OUT RETAIL

A parade of artists, designers, writers and antique dealers has invaded Harbor Country—many of them refugees from city congestion—to set up retail businesses in towns such as Three Oaks and New Buffalo, Mich. Most of this has happened over the past five years, amid the newcomers' own doubts that they could support themselves in a largely summer and fall marketplace. But they're surviving—even prospering—as Southwest Michigan evolves into a shopping destination.

To be sure, Harbor Country does not yet have the concentration of antique and gift shops for which Galena; Saugatuck, Mich., and Cedarburg, Wis., have become renowned. Southwest Michigan is a regional destination, with retail spaced widely among the Harbor towns. But taken together, the new generation of art galleries and interior design shops and womenswear boutiques is bound to divert some of the tourist traffic headed farther up the shore, to Saugatuck and Grand Traverse, Mich.

Most of the new retail is taking over blighted shop space that in many cases had been dormant for years. The goal is to attract more shoppers in the winter and spring off-season, something that Galena, for one, has become expert at doing. "We're trying to build more of a year-round economy here," says Pamela Sudlow, executive director of the Harbor Country Chamber of Commerce. "The summer season is so short that it's hard for groceries and many other businesses to survive."

Ms. Burneikis is a former teacher and social worker from Detroit who set up French Twist five years ago.

"This was once a florist shop, and people thought I was nuts trying to sell clothing at these

prices way out here," she says. "I was a pioneer. As it turned out, Chicagoans eventually found me. Probably 75% of my business is to Chicago residents."

The influx of Chicagoans has inspired Illinois-based business owners to relocate or establish branches in Harbor Country, too. Les Tissus Colbert, an importer of exclusive French fabrics for draperies and upholstery, had boutiques in Geneva and Hinsdale and a national following from readers of its *Architectural Digest* ads before it set up shop in New Buffalo last summer.

"We have ladies traveling here from South Bend and Elkhart (Ind.) instead of going all the way to Chicago," says manager and designer Nancy Di-John, who emigrated from the Chicago suburb of Kildeer two years ago. "And we also get the girls from Skokie coming over on day trips."

Richar Johnson, an interior designer known around Chicago by his first name alone, has been furnishing the most expensive residences in the Midwest from his West Loop studio for

25 years, escaping on weekends to his second home in Harbor Country. Last July, he set up a boutique in New Buffalo called Mix & Mingle, and his regular clients are quickly finding the place.

"I've had a weekend place here for 20 years, and I decided, why not go into business here?" says Mr. Johnson. He still commutes on weekdays back to his Chicago design studio, where a sofa can run \$15,000. At Mix & Mingle, the sofas are priced closer to \$3,000. "We cater to people from Chicago," he says, "and they don't want to pay the big bucks

to furnish their second homes here. It's a more relaxed business."

## OUT OF WICKER PARK

Many business owners make the move for good, never looking back. They're transplants like Brandon Nelson, owner of Ipso Facto Antiques in Three Oaks, which he opened five years ago



J. L. Powell offers gear for the high-end country life.



PHOTOS BY JOHN R. BOEHM

Interior designer Richar Johnson, top, left, shown with partner Jason Whalen, has set up shop in New Buffalo: His store there, Mix & Mingle, sells items suited to relaxed second homes.

after a career as a sculptor and musician in Wicker Park.

"I play music in groups here on the weekends with mostly ex-Chicagoans," Mr. Nelson says. "More and more Chicago natives are living and working here."

Rick Tuttle, owner of B Books in Three Oaks, was a River North graphic designer before making the move to Harbor Country three years ago. He designs leather-bound books priced upward of \$1,000 each and has found a ready audience of collectors.

"We have a whole community of Chicago transplants, and we all laugh about the decisions we made to come here," Mr. Tuttle says. "We end up working harder to stay afloat here than we did back in Chicago. But we enjoy the quieter lifestyle, too. I've had no regrets in coming here."

Some locals don't feel the same way, though they aren't willing to discuss it openly. Two years ago in Three Oaks, a half-dozen newcomers' storefronts were damaged by sniper bullets late at night. Nobody was caught, but old-timers agree that it was almost certainly one of their own

hoping to keep growth at bay.

"There have been some growing pains," says Jon Vickers, owner of the Vickers Theatre in Three Oaks, which shows art films in a 96-year-old movie house with 120 seats. He grew up in the area and is now co-chairman of the Three Oaks Downtown Development Authority. "Some people have nostalgia for the old days around here, when you knew everybody you met on the street. But the new people have made this town vibrant again, and it's been a long time since we could say that."

## FULL CIRCLE

Retailers now proving themselves in Harbor Country may eventually reverse course back to Chicago. The owners of J. L. Powell, a Three Oaks retailer of luxury British apparel in a converted old train station, are Josh and Sarah Powell. Mr. Powell was a trader on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange before he chucked that career for a slower life in Michigan. He and his wife have had such success in selling Barbour leather handbags at \$350 apiece and Purdey men's shoes at \$625 that they're considering opening a branch in Chicago.



In Three Oaks, shoppers visit Drier's Meat Market.