

MIRACLE *in a* DINER

TEXT BY EMILY BETZ TYRA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
TODD ZAWISTOWSKI

Bet you've never eaten in a
place quite like this.



LEFT: The coffee crew: Cairn Gardner, William Clark and Al Donaldson.
BELOW: Chef Jan Rasmussen has honed her cream pie skills at The Front Porch after making fruit pies for almost 10 years at nearby Friske Orchards market.
OPPOSITE: While the food is priced to keep The Front Porch running, the non-profit, nondenominational community cafe and ministry still needs to raise \$90,000 to pay for the building at 9235 Main Street over the next five years. It's served the town as a diner since John and Agnes Klooster first opened the doors in the 1950's.

Ellsworth's diner was dead. Shuttered, like the Ellsworth Grocery. The bait shop, too. Locked its doors suddenly in January, and the guys that went there every day at 2:30 to sit by the tackle and drink coffee found themselves with nowhere to go and talk about the world.

Instead of tumbleweeds, malaise rolled in from the roller coaster hills surrounding this rural, Dutch-settled northern town. Fewer shops open meant less traffic through town, sucking the folks in Ellsworth into disconnectedness and economic despair.

Then, a downright crazy idea sprouted in neighbor Bob Felton's mind. He's the outreach facilitator at Ellsworth Christian Reformed Church. What he knew: fellowship and a good meal went hand in hand. He believed that if the diner came back, things wouldn't seem so grim. People would get out of the house. Clergy could eat lunch with the townspeople and get the pulse on people's needs. Everyone—inside and outside the church—would have a place to gather, to grab a bite, feel welcome.

He wasn't wearing rose-tinted glasses. He knew the restaurant business can be brutal, even more so in a small town. Ellsworth's diner had burned through four owners in 10 years, most of them gung-ho at first, but crumbling under the effects of sleep deprivation, worry. Bob's idea was to share the burden, take all the village, and create a nonprofit cafe.

He rallied people he knew—a life-long dairy farmer, a go-getter, a school teacher, a Good Samaritan, a prior owner of the diner when business was booming—and together they wrote a tight little business plan. They actually considered the chilled economic climate a selling point for starting a family restaurant, and doing it now. The diner's current owner agreed to be paid in increments for the cost of the building, which came with all the kitchen equipment. Nothing on the menu would be over \$5. There would be only four on the payroll, all others who worked there would be volunteers. People would eat pancakes and sausage at tables they've wiped clean before.

Board members loaned their own cash for startup costs. And even though it doesn't have one, they called their new gathering place The Front Porch.



Today a shellac of ice covers C-48, the road to Ellsworth newly named The Breezeway in an effort to route business and tourist traffic along this scenic corridor between Atwood and East Jordan. Slipping into Ellsworth at 8:30 a.m., there is a little rainbow over the ball field at the elementary school, formed from ice crystals in the 9-degree air. Up the hill from the Moms and Tots Center and the Ellsworth Christian Reformed Church, a gentleman is chinking ice off the sidewalk in front of The Front Porch. He's a volunteer—John Hastings from Hastings Funeral Home across the street.

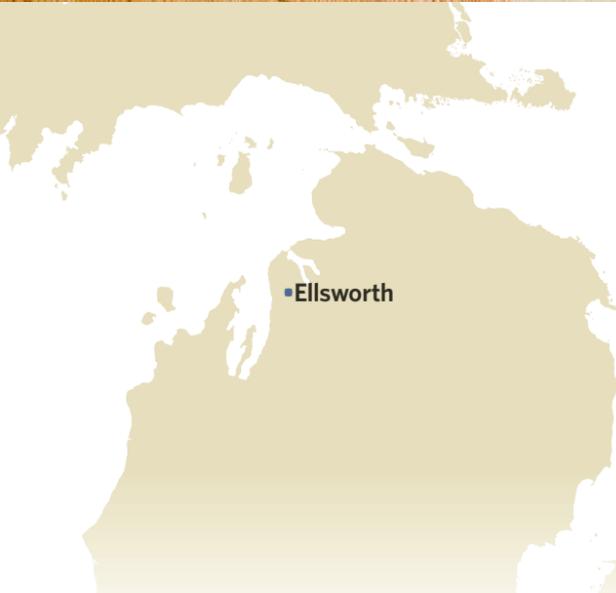
In the kitchen a fruit-overflowing cherry pie cools on parchment paper. The kitchen manager made this one, but usually Sherri Miller, the granddaughter of the diner's original owners, back when

it was called John's Health Center in the 1950's, volunteers her talents to make the homemade desserts. She has a full-time job and four kids, but in between basketball games she comes in and makes butterscotch, blueberry and pecan-vinegar pies. A group of Ellsworth locals, including pastors from three of the area churches, take turns being hosts. All eight of the waitresses—Jan, Dar, Rhonda, Marybeth, Deb, Sue, Clarissa and Julie—are volunteers. Ditto with the dishwashers.

Two of The Front Porch's only four employees, Gloria Tackett and Jan Rasmussen, are preparing for the \$4 senior lunch, hot turkey sandwiches today. Jan, the kitchen manager, finely dices celery—stalks and leaves and all—for the homemade stuffing. Gloria peels potatoes and drops them into the kettle.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Bob Vollmer, owner of Vollmer Auto Sales, serves homemade apple-sauce at the senior lunch. He's the volunteer waiter every Thursday. An everyday Thanksgiving. The Front Porch chef Jan Rasmussen (L, FRONT) and her right-hand-woman Gloria Tackett (R, FRONT) take a break from the home cooking with volunteer servers Dar McDonald and Julie Sitzema. Ellsworth High School senior Ashton Fisher enjoys a chicken tenders and chocolate milk lunch-on-the-town. Just joe for William and Cairn—it's fair trade from Guatemala. Prepping spuds for fresh-made fries. Thursday at noon Ellsworth seniors commune over lunch, beverage and dessert—and slip \$4 in the collection basket on their way out.



Hometown Eats

A sampling of the down-home breakfast dishes at the Front Porch.

Your Front Porch Special	
Two eggs, sausage or bacon, American fries, toast.....	\$4.99
Pancakes Topped with a Scoop of Butter	
Short stack	\$2.25
Tall Stack	\$3.25
Cinnamon Bread French Toast	
Two slices dusted with powdered sugar	\$3.25
Eggs the Way You Like 'Em	
Two eggs with toast.....	\$2.99
Jan's Almost Famous Biscuits and Sausage Gravy	
Full order	\$4.99
Half order	\$3.99
Quarter Order	\$2.50
Ellsworth Omelette	
The fluffiest two-egg omelette with ham, cheese, and a side of toast.....	\$4.25





FROM LEFT: The Front Porch menu is short and sweet: breakfast anytime, the best cheeseburgers, BLT's, homemade hot turkey, egg salad and tuna salad sandwiches, daily specials and from-scratch chili and soups. Every item is under \$5. Ellsworth High School students can run up the hill for a 30-minute lunch before study hall. Heavenly cream pies with meringue clouds. Locals David Rasmussen and Chuck Fox take a lunch break. Bethel Boss confirms her anniversary luncheon menu with Jan Rasmussen.

"I'm going to fill it up, just in case," she tells Jan. The Thursday lunches just started, and they get anywhere from 10 to 29 seniors for chicken à la king, ham and macaroni and cheese or breakfast-for-lunch. Jan nods and says, "Gloria and I have been friends for years, so we agree on just about everything. We've both worked in town for years. This is my fourth time working in this diner. It's Gloria's fifth or sixth."

"I've never worked in a kitchen quite so clean," Gloria says, remarkable, since they depend so much on volunteer help to do the dishes and the mopping up. "I've never seen a business like this. It's a blessing," she says, moving a pan of hardboiled eggs off the burner.

Out in the cafe, three men sit three abreast on the stools, quietly sipping coffee and somehow managing not to attack the homespun cinnamon rolls on a cake pedestal, or the giant cream pies (homemade with meringue peaks) sitting coyly on the counter in front of them. They're all from Ellsworth and all war veterans—Cairn served in Vietnam, William fought in WWII and Al in Korea, but Al doesn't like to talk about that. He does, eventually, succumb to a cinnamon roll.

At the big table in the front window, the winter sun warms the coverall-ed backs of Rick Pierson and Ralph Hines. They're logging out at Jerry Ross's property between here and Central Lake, says Hines, "getting the ash before the bore does," and it's break time. Two actual lumberjacks, but neither ordered pancakes. "Let's have one more," says Rick, when Dar comes over with the pot of coffee—fair-trade from Guatemala—the same way people order one more brew when the pub is cozy and the conversation is good.

Today The Front Porch is a place to come in from the cold. And evidently for true confessions: I

overhear the man at the cash register say that his son wore a dress to school this week. "And lemme tell ya', he makes a really ugly girl," he says.

At 10 a.m. Harlan Peterson, chef-owner of the legendary Tapawingo restaurant, also in Ellsworth but serving haute cuisine, and his friend Jerry Sessions come in for breakfast. They order the same thing, the omelet, which comes one way: thin, French-style and filled with ham and cheese. The cinnamon rolls—decadently buttery and faintly yeasty, caramelized on the edges—are almost sold out. The food is simple and delicious.

Now high school kids stream in the front door in one rush. Ellsworth has an open campus, and this diner gives them an alternative to packing a lunch or heading to The Gold Nugget bar for lunch. The students' lunch is a pre fixe \$3, and like the senior lunch, it's always a surprise. Says senior Kysha Keehn, "We kind of have a network to find out—ask someone who has cell phone reception, 'know what's uptown today?'" And that's uptown Ellsworth versus downtown: "We really don't have anything else," laughs the senior class president, Ashton Fisher. "It's just we have to walk up the hill to get here." It's Homecoming week—since Ellsworth doesn't have a football team, they wait until basketball season—and he's dressed in a shirt and tie today. He's up for Homecoming king at the home game against Mancelona tomorrow.

"The starting point guard is running against me, so we'll see," he says about his chances of being crowned. "But he's really nice. He's my sister's boyfriend, actually." With 60 kids in the high school, the Ellsworth student body is as close-knit as it gets, and pretty much everyone participates in spirit week. Tuesday was "cross-dress" day, come to find out. "I came in a miniskirt that broke school rules," says Fisher. Terry

Wooten, a poet who lives in the area, came to present to Fisher's class Tuesday, and afterward the English teacher treated the whole class to lunch uptown at The Front Porch. "You have to realize that this skirt was a size zero," Ashton says. But when a senior gentleman came out of the bathroom and saw Ashton, he didn't even bat an eyelash. Everyone is welcome here.

Savanna Karhoff is treating her dad to a burger. Business partners Chuck Fox and David Rasmussen are here for lunch for the fourth time this week. In fact, Chuck is back for the second time today—he and his son share a cinnamon roll every morning before school. Dave's mom is Jan, the kitchen manager. He has a piece of her banana cream pie.

The senior citizen lunch is at noon, but they start arriving at 11:30 to get a good seat. Bob Vollmer, the car salesman from across the street who's been in business for 40 years in town, is always the waiter for senior lunch. They pray the Lord's Prayer in unison at high noon, and Bob starts working it, running back and forth to the kitchen to get trays of hot turkey dinner, which Jan and Gloria insist be served piping hot. "I've never got so many hugs in my life as I do on Thursdays," Bob says.

Bethel and Clarence Boss, both born and bred in Ellsworth, are confirming the details of their upcoming 60th anniversary party, which they're holding at The Front Porch. Dairy and corn farmers who just got out of farming last spring, when they were 80 and 83 years old, they have never eaten processed food in their lives. Says Bethel: "At noon on Saturday, our four kids and grandkids will come. They're making pork loin, dressing, mashed redskin potatoes, applesauce, salad and a brownie. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

Besides 60 years of marriage, they have something else to celebrate: They're going to rebuild this

spring on the farm where they've lived for 59 years. A couple of months ago, a fire burned their 100-year-old farmhouse to the ground. "It was one o'clock in the morning," says Bethel, steady and matter-of-fact as she tells the story. "We just barely got out. And we didn't get the cat out. They took us into the ambulance and a girl on the Central Lake fire department heard Kitty howling and she rescued Kitty. They gave her oxygen in the ambulance, too." At daybreak, the Bosses waited for the vet to open. "Kitty was pretty well smoked up," says Clarence. "We went to K-mart to get a few clothes then we came here, for breakfast." The house was still smoldering.

It seems hard to imagine the void that would be here if the diner hadn't opened when it did. If instead people stayed in their houses, didn't come make pie after basketball practice, sit at the counter and not talk about the Korean War, if they couldn't come be around their neighbors just for its own sake, hug the car dealer after he brought them pot roast, take comfort in the conviviality of it all.

"If another individual bought it and tried to make a go of it, they really would have struggled through the winter. I don't think it would have made it," says Jan Rasmussen. "They're coming because they know it's theirs."

And those coffee guys who had nowhere to go when the bait shop closed? Now they come here every day at 2:30. The diner closes at 2 p.m. sharp, but Jan stays until the first one comes in, through the side door, and just asks that the last one out turns off the coffee pot. They sip coffee, sit elbow-to-elbow and try to solve the world's problems. And bets are, since they are from Ellsworth, they're already off to a good start. ■

Emily Betz Tyra half thinks there might be a rainbow over Ellsworth every morning. ETYRA@TRAVERSEMAGAZINE.COM

Find The Front Porch at 9235 Main St., Ellsworth, 231-588-2000, and learn more about it at frontporchellsworth.org

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