

Apple picking evokes fond memories of past falls when my family headed for Eckert's to pick a bushel or two of apples. An epoch event my brother and I eagerly anticipated each year now shares a special place in my own children's hearts.

Our journey begins on a bright autumn day as we head down Highway 270. From I-270, we exit North on 367 to Alton. As we approach the bridge, Jon once again points out the magnificent construction of the bridge, as the kids point to all the boats they see. Once across, we turn left on the Great River Road. Now we all begin to ooh and ahhh over God's magnificent creation.

Rising above us on our right are beautiful bluffs covered with rich scarlet, russet, and golden hues of autumn overlooking the great river to our left. Gliding upon waves of sparkling diamonds, brightly colored sailboats glisten in the sun.

We continue this beautiful drive until we reach Grafton, once an important river port in the late 1800s. Now we find antique shops, Tara Point Inn, and The Finn Inn restaurant which houses huge fish in wall-to-wall tanks. But today we have an appointment with apples, so we turn right on Route 3 and follow the signs to Otterville Road, and then turn left into Eckert's. Soon we are all seated on a wagon and headed out to our favorite part of the orchard—Delicious—Red and Golden, that is. Before long, with bags bulging and sweet juice running down our little ones' chins, we once again climb aboard the wagon and head back to the barn. Here we could buy homegrown produce, much of which was handpicked from local farmers, but we wait for our favorite roadside stands. For more information about Eckert's, call (618) 786-3445.

From Eckert's, we follow our way back to Grafton where we pick up the Great River Road again and continue our journey, stopping at roadside markets to select our ornamental ears of corn, adorable miniature pumpkins, and decorative squash. With these acquisitions made, a serious family council forms to help each child determine which pumpkin best suits them.

Such serious deliberations work up our appetites for fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, slaw, and biscuits and butter. As our autumn tradition has it, only Pere Marquette's restaurant can satisfy both our appetites and our souls. Located in Pere Marquette's rustic Lodge, which is just five miles from Grafton on Route 100 and twenty-five miles from Alton, this comfortable restaurant serves both family-style dinners and off-the-menu dinners. Reservations are strongly suggested and a must during the lovely fall season. To make reservations, call (618) 786-2331.

After blackberry and peach cobblers, we head for the veranda for a sittin' spell while the

younger ones run around the wide open expanse of grounds. As darkness encroaches upon dusk, we walk back into the lodge to enjoy a game of chess. We stand on the chessboard to move our pieces, which are taller than Josiah. We once again marvel at the massive 700-ton fireplace and the huge beams, some three feet in diameter, that encompass us in this large impressive hall. Fifty luxury guestrooms are located on either side of the hall with an indoor swimming pool, whirlpool, and saunas. Natural stone guestrooms are also located on the back side of the lodge.

Part of the Pere Marquette State Park, the lodge is situated on 9,500 acres and offers camping, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, and tennis. Long ago this area was an Indian village, and up until the French and Indian War of 1760, the Indians controlled a thriving fur trade centered on the Illinois River.

The park and lodge are named after the French Jesuit missionary priest, Father Jacques Marquette. He and Louis Jolliet were the first Europeans to enter this area in 1673. A large white cross now stands east of the park entrance to mark where Marquette and Jolliet landed.

For a wonderful fall weekend getaway for you and your spouse, climb the steep ascent to Tara Point Inn. Once on top of this Grafton bluff, you will be awed by the spectacular view of the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. High above these rivers, you can see for miles and relax on the 200-foot wraparound deck while watching cruisers and colorful sailboats glide upon the glistening water. Situated in secluded surroundings and with only four rooms for rent, you can enjoy intimate privacy often unattainable at other motels and inns. To make reservations or for additional information, call (618) 786-3555.

Both rich in history and in beauty, the Great River Road provides much to see and do.