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Staying in the Loop

A family of four lives their dream and takes a year off for an 8,749-mile cruise.

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Pioneer Press

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"There is nothing, absolutely nothing, half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

- Kenneth Grahame, "The Wind in the Willows"

Jeff Janacek's wife was backing up the files on his Palm Pilot a few years ago when she saw one called "Life List."

Tops on the list of things Janacek wanted to accomplish was "The Great Loop." What, she asked, was that?

Turns out it was a yearlong boat trip on the continuous waterway that encircles the eastern portion of North America - inland rivers, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Seaboard and the Great Lakes .

Janacek thought he and his wife, Sally Colwell, could make the journey after their two sons, David and Adam Janacek, were grown and the couple had retired.

Colwell had a better idea. "We should do this, but we shouldn't wait until the kids are grown," she told him. "We should do it while the kids are still young enough to go with us."

So the Maplewood family bought a 36-foot trawler

and spent 54 weeks in 2006 and 2007 cruising the loop, covering 8,749 miles. They returned to Minnesota Aug. 18.

The Great Loop

The Janacek-Colwell family, of Maplewood, recently spent a year cruising the Great Loop.



Janacek, 58, is a former investigator for the Columbia Heights Police Department, the Minnesota attorney general's office and the Minnesota

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Department of Public Safety. He works as a licensed boat captain and as an assistant manager at West Marine in Stillwater.

Colwell, 57, is a pediatrician for HealthEast in Maplewood. She took a year off from her practice to make the trip.

The family found renters for their house, sold their car and put everything in storage.

"People should live their dreams," Jeff Janacek said. "I think a lot of people have something in the back of their mind that they've really, really wanted to do, and there are all kinds of reasons not to do these things - money, pets, the house. There are all kinds of obstacles - any number of which can derail this plan - but I think that most people will look back 10 years from now and be really glad that they did this."

36-FOOT TRAWLER

Janacek, Colwell and the boys already had done one long boat trip: the Inside Passage of Alaska in the summer of 2003. They knew, however, that their 26-foot boat would not be big enough for the Great Loop.

They bought a 36-foot Monk trawler on the Internet and named it "Adirondack" after Colwell's summer camp in upstate New York. They started their trip in Bayfield, Wis., where they keep the trawler moored, and headed down the Great Lakes to Chicago.

The family lived on the boat for 54 weeks, never once staying in a hotel. They took two weeks off at Christmas to be with Colwell's parents in Vermont, then wintered on the boat in the Bahamas.

The family traveled mostly counterclockwise, taking

advantage of the downstream currents on the Mississippi River. They headed south in the fall and north in the spring to avoid hurricanes and cold weather.

Arriving at cities and small towns by boat was like coming in through the back door, Janacek said.

"You're seeing them like nobody else sees them. It's much more peaceful. You don't have the noise, traffic, parking problems," he said. "Going into New York City in your own boat and anchoring right near the Statue of Liberty, how cool is that? And the Chesapeake Bay is just to die for. It's so beautiful, so interesting, so friendly. I mean, how many ways can you eat crab? I don't know. But it sure is fun to try."

Other highlights of the trip included swimming with the manatees in Crystal River, Fla., learning to scuba-dive in the Bahamas and navigating the approximately 175 locks along the route.

Janacek's favorite locks were the eight staircase locks in Ottawa, Canada, and the Peterborough, Ontario, Hydraulic Lift Lock on the Trent-Severn Waterway.

"In Ottawa, you go up the locks right through downtown," he said. "Parliament is on the right, and they have a set of eight locks that look like a staircase. You tie up right in town and go see the town."

The Peterborough Hydraulic Lift Lock is "like two bathtubs," Janacek said. "They turn the valve, and it's wooooooop. It's a little too fast. You go up 65 feet ... and you're way up above the water. It's awesome, awesome."

The family had four folding bicycles they kept onboard, but those weren't really necessary,

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Janacek said. "You'd pull into some little town someplace and stand there with a forlorn look on your face and wonder about where we could buy some groceries for these poor hungry teenagers," he said. "We used people's cars 16 different times. The generosity of people was just unbelievable."

UP TO 500 TRY TRIP

About 400 to 500 boats cruise the Great Loop each year, said Janice Kromer, executive director of the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association, based in Summerville, S.C. People have done it in six weeks, but most take a year, she said.

Most people use trawlers between 32 feet and 40 feet, but people do it in 22-foot gas cruisers and in huge diesel yachts. Trips generally cost \$30,000 to \$60,000, depending on the cost of fuel, she said.

Janacek said potential "Loopers" should take note of some restrictions: You have to get under a 19-foot bridge in Chicago, and there's shallow water around Florida and the Bahamas, "so anything over 5 feet of draft is a hassle."

"And when you go aground - not if you go aground, when you go aground - what's going to hit?" Janacek said. "Is it going to be a big strong heavy keel, or is it going to be your propellers?"

Janacek said the family used a wireless air card for an Internet connection and kept a blog at www.messinginboats.com.

Colwell said the timing was key.

"I felt that eighth and 10th grades were really the last years that were reasonable," she said. "(David) had to be back for 11th and 12th grades."

She said the boys loved sleeping late, being in

charge of their own schoolwork and seeing parts of the country they hadn't seen.

Colwell said she loved spending so much time together. "Kids are what I do. I like being with them, and this just seemed like a great thing to do as a family."

She added, "I also figured it would give them great material for their college application essays."

David Janacek, 16 and now a junior at Mounds Park Academy, attended Minnesota Online High School during the year they were gone.

Adam Janacek, 14, said he taught himself eighth grade during the year they were gone. He now is a ninth-grader at Roseville Area High School.

"A lot of people can't believe that we did something like this," Adam said. "But it was really fun. You get to see a lot of different places. It really helps you see the whole world."

He said living on a small boat also taught him how to live without many material objects.

"You really don't need that much stuff - just really the bare essentials," he said.

Mary Divine covers Washington County. She can be reached at mdivine@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5443.

ON THE WEB

The Janacek-Colwell family kept a blog of its journey at www.messinginboats.com; America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association's Web site is www.greatloop.com.

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KEEPING THE TAB

Here's what the Janacek-Colwell family spent on its 54-week boat trip:

Boat: \$195,000

Boat repairs and improvements: \$11,471

Restaurants: \$9,690

Marinas: \$8,904

Groceries: \$8,452

Fuel: \$7,167

Entertainment: \$6,732

Other: \$5,198

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