



Rediscovered Identity Wagon Trail is now Rowleys Bay Resort

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By Myles Dannhausen Jr.

When Jewel Peterson Ouradnik of the Wagon Trail Resort called Susie Watson for marketing advice last November, she was just looking for guidance about where she should be advertising.

Seven months later, she's re-opening the family resort with a new name, a new marketing strategy, and a new perspective. This week, the Wagon Trail became Rowleys Bay Resort, reclaiming the name given to it by Lou Casagrande when he founded it in 1948.

In the 1990s, resorts and cottages that were a hallmark of Door County vacations for generations gave way to upscale inns and condos. The Wagon Trail was one of the few stalwarts to hold on, but this winter the Gills Rock-based marketing team of Henry Godbout and Susie Watson convinced Ouradnik that she could make changes that would actually reinforce the resort's roots while recognizing its greatest strength – its location on Rowleys Bay.

The resort is one of the county's largest, situated on a secluded shore just a short kayak paddle from the Mink River, Newport State Park, and over 1,774 acres of land preserved by the Nature Conservancy. But you'd be hard-pressed to learn any of this from their old marketing materials.

"Jewel and her family have spent all their time in and on this building," Watson explains. "They've never had time to look out the window. Their focus was on the business inside. That's why the front of the old brochure was of the building, not the bay. You can't see the whole picture when you're inside of it."

The resort features a restaurant, bakery, marina, conference facilities, and a myriad of room rates and styles. In an effort to communicate a dizzying array of offerings, their easiest sell was often forgotten. The Wagon Trail, with over 700 feet of Rowleys Bay shore frontage, wasn't even listed under waterfront lodging on the Door County Visitor Bureau website.

"We were always so focused on all the types of rooms we could offer," Ouradnik says, which blinded them to the serene bay and rare wildlife on display just steps from their front door.

In 2008, Frommer's guidebook to the "500 Places to See Before they Disappear" featured the Mink River Estuary. Considered one of the most pristine estuaries in the world, Mike Grimm of the Nature Conservancy called it a rare habitat.

"It's one of the few sites to be minimally developed on the Great Lakes," he said. "It's important for a lot of migrating birds, fish spawning, and it's probably the second best site in the world for the Hines Emerald Dragonfly."

Over 200 species of birds pass through each year, including bald eagles, sandhill cranes, and yellow

rails.

The resort's new marketing effort highlights its proximity to these rare features. Where the old brochure featured a cluttered picture of the lodge, the new one features an aerial photo of the Mink River and Rowleys Bay. Kayak tours down the river are offered by Gravity Trails from the resort's shore, fishermen can launch from the private marina with Reel Addictions charter fishing, and thrill-seekers can take a ride on the Gravity Trails zip-line course. To the south is Sand Bay, accessible via the resort's five miles of hiking trails.

The new Rowleys Bay Resort is going against the tide in other ways as well. The resort's new logo and signage harkens back to the 1960s-style fun maps, inviting families to an affordable waterfront vacation.

"As my family celebrates our 40th anniversary here, we want to go back to the history of the old-fashioned vacation – the vacation people remember growing up," Ouradnik says with pride.

It was the emphasis that Watson and Godbout put on the old family vacation that sold Ouradnik on their ideas.

"At first I wasn't even looking to change anything," she said. "Like every business owner I wondered where I could advertise to get more business. I had no idea they would turn us this upside down."

When they met to discuss a more substantial effort, Ouradnik made one thing clear: "Just so you know, we're not going to change the name," she told her new marketing team. They, in turn, made it clear that the name change was step number one.

Ouradnik, a hands-on owner, would have to step back a bit. "It was all kind of shocking to me, and quite emotional," she says. "When I came here I was eight years old. I grew up here."

Her parents, Alice and Leonard Peterson, bought the property in 1970. Alice died in 1988, and Leonard retired in 2003, handing the operation over to Jewel and her husband Bob. Today her son Kyle is the restaurant's head chef, while her daughter and niece are both bakers in Grandma's Swedish Bakery, where they still work with Alice's original recipes.

When woven so tightly into a family, business is never just business. It becomes a member of the family, with surprisingly strong emotional bonds. It makes change a delicate process. Ouradnik wasn't ready to make the leap until she had something new to latch onto, and the retro logo captured the feel she was looking for. The casual, fun feel fit what she always thought the resort was.

The name is the most dramatic of several changes made to re-emphasize the waterfront, the natural environment, and the property's history. The restaurant décor has received a facelift as well.

"It was really tiring me out," Ouradnik explains. The dining room has been refaced, and the throwback vacation theme carried in. Vintage outdoor sporting equipment adorns the walls, and the ribcage of a kayak handmade by James Rack hangs from the ceiling. But the change is not made just for the sake of change.

"What we're not doing is changing anything that anybody loves," Ouradnik says. "We're not trying to make it something that it's not. It's old Door County, and a lot of people love old Door County."

Restaurant staples remain, including the popular Sunday brunch, salad bar, and a classic Door County fish boil.

While the logo and name have changed, the resort is still “very much in the family,” Ouradnik says.

“Sometimes people worry about us way out here, but we’re doing great, and we’ve got a lot of exciting things in our future.”

Rowleys Bay Resort, formerly the Wagon Trail

www.rowleysbayresort.com

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