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LA FARGE, Wis.----One stare into open space can seize a world of possibility. Such is the view from LaFarge, a tender retreat in the Kickapoo Valley of southwest Wisconsin.

Kickapoo Valley is unlike any part of Wisconsin I have seen.

The hills run as long as an opera, the stars sing with drama.

Kickapoo Valley is part of the Driftless Region, which denotes lack of glacial drift. The area was spared from the glaciers that covered the rest of Wisconsin. The Driftless area was once a prehistoric sea. Now, what you see is the sea floor's mountain range.

La Farge is the home of Organic Valley, the nation's largest farmer owned cooperative that covers 29 states.

Organic Valley recently hosted the Kickapoo Country Fair, which was the motivation for our visit. We had the best maple cotton candy of our lives. We also camped out at Village Park behind the La Farge Public Schools building. The park has 15 sites accessible for trailers and tents. All sites have electric hookups. I hadn't camped since my soggy 1992 boat trip down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

At La Farge, I refused to bring an iPod, transistor radio or computer into the tent. I gazed through a tent window at the canopy of stars in the Wisconsin sky. I listened to the silence. It was one of the highlights of my summer.

Kickapoo Valley is a reasonable 5-hour drive from Chicago and I would return for a fall trip. Area farmer Jim Wedeberg is one of the seven founding farmers of Organic Valley.

During a conversation in a country fair tent, I asked Wedeberg to interpret the land.

Wedeberg, 57, is an area native and fourth generation family farmer. His dairy farm is in Gays Mills about 30 miles from La Farge. Wedeberg has been certified organic since 1988 when he no longer wanted to work with chemicals. He milks about 50 cows on 140 acres. Wedeberg and his sons Jake and John also have a pasture of alfalfa, corn, oats and a bit of tobacco.

"Kickapoo Valley is the center of the Driftless area," he said. "It's undiscovered, which us as residents, prefer. There's apple orchards in Gays Mills that go back to the late 1800s. Every fall they have an apple festival. Tourism has only evolved in the last 15 years."

Wedeborg's great-grandfather John bought the Gays Mills farm in 1897. He came from western Norway as many Norwegians settled throughout the valley in the 1850s. Diversified agriculture included cows, chickens, pigs and tobacco. "We wondered with all the flat land why they picked these rough hills to settle on," Wedeborg said with string music playing in the background. "But when you see what they left in Norway -- this is flat."

The winding Kickapoo River was the perfect destination for the morning following our camp- out. We rented a 17-foot long aluminum canoe from the Kickapoo Yacht Club Canoe Rental in the Rockton Bar, Highway 131, about five miles north of La Farge. The canoe was a deal at \$25 for a day.

Canoe rental proprietor Mike Donovan drove us four miles north to Winchell Valley where we launched the canoe at Bridge 8. I liked Mike right away. There was a huge bottle of Mountain Dew in the front of his Chevy van. And nothing gives you a kickapoo like Mountain Dew. We canoed south to Bridge/Landing 12, where we had left our car.

The river runs through the 8,569-acre Kickapoo Valley Reserve. The land offers biking, hiking, camping, horse and mule trails, and birding. More than 100 species of nesting birds have been seen in the reserve. The reserve is open year-round.

The reserve exists because of a partially completed dam, part of a flood control project authorized by Congress in 1962 but the flooding was later unauthorized. In December 2000 the property transferred ownership from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to the state of Wisconsin and Ho-Chunk nation. The reserve is recognized as a National Natural Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The rich soil makes up for one of the most successful organic farming regions in the world.

The drive from Highway 14 out of Madison into La Farge is lined with commercial vegetable and potato farming. La Farge is in Vernon County, which has the most organic farms in Wisconsin. The region's rich, driftless soil represents one of the most successful organic farming regions in the world.

"There's between 40 and 45 organic farms in the county," Wedeborg said. "We've sown the seed. People around here were watching us to see if anything was going to happen. Older farmers ask 'If I convert to organics will there be a market?' Young farmers don't have that question. They believe that market is here."

La Farge was so small (600 people) we had to drive 13 miles to the cozy hamlet of Viroqua to get oil for our grilling at the campground. We found the Viroqua Food Cooperative, 609 N. Main St., in downtown Viroqua. The coop is open from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m. daily, which was a good thing since we were tooling around on a Sunday night.

The overall scale of life has downshifted over the years in the Kickapoo Valley.

Wedeborg reflected, "We see it in our schools. They are struggling with enrollment. Our churches. The community has declined because the young people have left. Rural Wisconsin is littered with abandoned cheese plants. My home county once had 27 creameries. Now there's one. They're all consolidated. But a town of 600 people La Farge now has 400 jobs at Organic Valley.
"Organic Valley has played a part in the change of the Kickapoo Valley because it has brought hope back to the valley."