

THE TELEGRAPH

Homestyle

Summer 2017

Home Away From Home

A day in the
life of a B & B

Night Market
Something old;
something new

Plus:
The Genehouse Chronicles:
The animal whisperer

Home away from home

A day in the life...of a B & B

Story and photos by Vicki Bennington

ELSAH – Guests come from near and far to stay at Elsay's Green Tree Inn, owned by Gary and Connie Davis.

While one might expect visitors from surrounding states, it's a little surprising to discover that people from St. Louis and other nearby communities – including those as close as Alton and Godfrey – come to take in the tranquility, peacefulness and hospitality that the Davises provide.

"We have a lot of guests who come from around the area. They tell us that simply getting away from home helps them relax, they are able to sit and read a book, they might go for a walk or go up to Grafton to the wineries or restaurants," Connie said. "It doesn't matter how close they are to home, it's still a getaway."

The Davises moved to Elsay from Springfield, Missouri five years ago when they bought Green Tree after Connie was "downsized" from her job in the insurance industry. Running a bed and breakfast was always a dream, and when the inn went up for sale, it didn't take long for the two to fall in love with the charming and historic town. It wasn't long before the guests started to come, either, and Connie's cooking has become one of the draws.

"We have people who come from all over the country, too, and something that's been a surprise – is all the international visitors," Davis said.

The two have welcomed guests from New Zealand, England, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, South Africa, Australia, France and Spain.

And one year, two young men were traveling Route 66 to the West Coast on Harleys after flying into Chicago from Germany, making stops along the way.

"One lady from Europe was astounded to look out the window and see hummingbirds around the feeder," Gary said. Hummingbirds are only found in the Americas.



"The Meadowlark" guest room with two iron full size beds.

was a "bobby," who said his job was to "break up hooligans."

"A couple of girls from Belgium were sure that Kansas was going to be the highlight of their trip to America because of their love for 'The Wizard of Oz,'" Gary said.

"There are so many stories from so many different people. It's very interesting, and we both love meeting them all," Connie said.

And Elsay itself has an "other world," nostalgic feel, which is another reason it serves as a getaway no matter from how far or near visitors come.

Every day, around check-in time (3 p.m.), Connie chooses an item from her revolving sweet treats menu. Repeat guests especially look forward to her concoctions, like chocolate chip cookies, blackberry cobbler, pineapple upside down cake or chocolate cake.

"I like to spend time reading cookbooks, and then I get to be creative and try new recipes. Then I decide if they get to stay in my rotation of treats," Connie said.

Her multi-course breakfast might include her legendary coffee cake, an egg dish, fruit compotes, orange juice and the rich, Chauvin coffee, made in St. Louis. Depending on the season, she may make poached pears with honey and cinnamon or upside down baked blueberry or peach pancakes – and she does most everything from scratch, unless someone comes along at the last minute.

And that's happened a few times. They get a knock in the middle of the night from someone needing a room, and they accommodate them if at all possible.

Gary worked as a union electrician for

37 years, traveling every week, Monday through Friday. He now teaches in the electrical program at American Trade School in St. Louis, often working long hours, so Connie has learned to “man” the inn herself when the need arises.

Maintaining the quality of the accommodations, meals and ambience, along with the accounting, phone calls, emails and administration, is not as easy as it might seem at first glance.

The sheer volume of breakfast dishes, running the sanitizing dishwasher multiple times a day, and changing and washing linens keeps her on her toes. Gary helps out when not working at his day job, even driving 35 miles back at lunchtime to help out before returning for later classes.

Talking with guests – especially over breakfast – is one of his specialties.

B & B, continued on page 10



Innkeepers Gary and Connie Davis each have their own list of chores, but often work together to clean up after morning meals.



The Green Tree Inn in Elsah is full of charm for a weekend getaway or long-term stay.



Four-poster beds are in many of the guest rooms, creating a homey feel, along with quilts and plush comforters.



Paintings like a watercolor by former Elsah resident James K. Schmidt can be viewed throughout the inn.

B & B, continued from page 9

Many of the guests are in the area on business, a number of them associated with Principia College; others are business travelers who need to catch a flight, some with a 4:30 a.m. wake-up call. So Connie's days start early in order to get breakfast on the table.

The inn itself includes original stenciled wood flooring that survived the Great Flood of 1993, and the rooms were professionally decorated after the flood. Various paintings by local artists hang on the walls. There are six bedrooms — five with queen size beds, and one with two full size. Sometimes, groups rent the entire inn for a wedding party, cards or game-playing weekend, or just an annual get-together with friends or family.

For guests who have time, there are opportunities for various activities, like walking trails, bicycling, sitting on the wide, veranda-style porches, strolling in the garden (where there has been one wedding), and sitting by the fire pit



Green Tree proprietor Connie Davis has a passion for cooking, and a multiple course breakfast greets guests every morning with dishes like Eggs in a Basket and Belgian waffles with blueberries.

(backdrop for a second wedding). For one wedding, Connie even prepared the rehearsal dinner and the wedding feast.

Former Green Tree owner Mike Pitchford built the main property on vacant lots that backed up to the Union Hotel, which burned a few years ago. Connie said there was evidence that a blacksmith shop stood on the lot at one time. The Davises recently purchased the

former hotel lot and are mulling various ideas around in their minds about how they could possibly expand the offerings at the B & B.

On the neighboring lot where Green Tree's strolling garden is located, a house stood that was later used as a library.

"People often drive the River Road, yet still don't know that Elsay exists, or have not driven through it," Connie said. "We want people to know the village is here — stay in one of the bed and breakfasts, spend some time walking around and getting to know the friendly people.

"We have about 60 people living directly in the Elsay community," she said. "Everybody knows everybody; everyone pitches in and gets involved."

And if the inn's guests are game, residents (and Connie and Gary) like to stop and chat, but it's certainly not expected if the visitors would rather have quiet time.

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