

January 2022 Reefnotes

By Janet Newman



When I visited Debbie and Brion McDonald, I could see they've made themselves at home and intend to be comfortable for the six months each year they will live at The Reef. Having worked hard their entire lives, they are ready to enjoy retirement and relax in the recliners which have replaced the previous owners' wicker furniture.

Brion was born and raised just outside Peoria, Illinois, but he is a descendent of hardscrabble people from Arkansas who came north after the Depression in search of work. You can hear an echo of the weary accent of those folks in Brion's voice. When he told me that he is named after one of Tennessee Ernie Ford's sons (thus the unusual spelling), I understood why Ford's music and roots in Tennessee appealed to Brion's parents. The song I most associate with Ford is *Sixteen Tons*, which conveys the frustration of working hard and not getting ahead.

Debbie, who also has a hint of a twang in her speech, grew up on a corn and soybean farm outside of Canton, Illinois. In addition to detasseling corn on the farm ("the worst job ever"), working at the local riding stables ("the best job ever"), and babysitting, Debbie says she grew up riding horses and motorcycles. Her first "car" was a 125cc motorcycle she rode year-round, requiring some heavy Carhartt coveralls and warm boots in the winter to make the 15-minute ride to town. That focus and fearlessness might be why she is the couple's designated driver on St Croix.

Brion and Debbie both had long careers in the Peoria, Illinois, district of the American Water Works company, where they initially met. Brion worked in the field for 41 years and Debbie worked in the office for 34. With so many years of experience between them, Brion jokes, "we were THE power couple at Water Works." The McDonalds worked under eight different Senior Managers during their careers and were more than happy to share their combined knowledge of operations and administration with the new leaders.

Both Brion and Debbie are self-proclaimed do-it-yourselfers, having completed many home construction projects -- plumbing, electrical, tiling, flooring installation, and, according to Debbie, "more painting than anyone should ever have to do." They've happily retired from most of these projects, too, and plan to have any future work done by professionals.

Before closing on unit 433 in August, the McDonalds visited St. Croix several times, staying on different parts of the island each time. While they have traveled throughout the Caribbean, Debbie says she learned about St. Croix through the *Caribbean Life* television show. Whenever they visited St. Croix, "it felt like home." They might have retired to a cabin in Minnesota, a favorite family vacation spot where they loved fishing for walleye, had it not been for the loss of their son in 2014 as the result of a car accident. Life's curveball sent them in a different direction. They sold their home outside of Peoria last August and built a cabin near Canton, where Brion can fish to his heart's content on the nearby 850 acres of lakes. After the passing of his last hunting dog several years ago, Brion gave up his love of hunting quail and pheasant. He is annoyed he can't get all the Bears' football games here, but he looks forward to taking up saltwater fishing when his new fishing pole arrives. Debbie is an animal lover. Their 18-pound Pixiebob cat, Simon, has made the move with them. Debbie likes the beach and reading. She stays in close contact with two of the children (now adults with children of their own) she babysat during college and hopes they will visit St. Croix in the future.

The McDonalds have returned to golf after a 12-year hiatus. They're adjusting to swinging on hard terrain. Debbie says Brion has discovered they need to "scrape or scoop" the ball. Brion adds, "Like you'd do to get the last brownie out of the pan." They also plan to take up pickleball. So, even though the McDonalds describe themselves as "homebodies," you can expect to see them on the golf course, pickleball court, or near the water -- where, if they aren't floating with their noodles, Debbie will be reading on the beach and Brion will be fishing from shore.