

# Lake Superior MAGAZINE™



## Hot for the Holidays

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- Warm Drinks ▪ Ice Lanterns

## Family Friendly Resorts

What Keeps Them Coming Back?

## Wintering on Madeline Island

## The Coast Guard's History of Heroes

## Open House

### Innkeepers Find Success & Happiness in Sharing Their Home

by Konnie LeMay

Despite having guests all the time throughout the year, when Christmas comes, Angie and Tim Allen still get excited to deck their halls and hear what the holiday visitors will say.

They dig out the boxes upon boxes of ornaments – many antiques or vintage styles – and put up six trees, string garlands and fill the table tops and fireplace mantels with holiday statues, trinkets and books.

“Decorating for Christmas for us was always a big deal,” says Angie.



Perhaps their added enthusiasm these years has something to do with the halls they deck.

The innkeepers of the A.G. Thomson House bed-and-breakfast inn in Duluth love their 101-year-old Dutch Colonial Revival style

house. The couple worked toward the dream of owning such a house and such a business when Tim was an officer in the Air Force and they would buy houses to fix up and resell as they traveled from base to base.

“Every time the Air Force moved us, we would buy a fixer-upper. That didn’t scare us,” Tim says. Tim honed and augmented his home repair skills, saving money on the rehabilitations by learning to do most everything himself.

“We just fell in love with old houses,” adds Angie.

Contemplating retirement six years ago while stationed in



TIM ALLEN

A.G. Thomson House bed-and-breakfast inn is run by Tim and Angie Allen in a Dutch Colonial-style home built in 1909. The outside paint was what Angie considered a dreary blue when they bought it. “I knew even before we closed that this was going to be a yellow house,” she says. “It’s happy and relaxing.”

Nebraska, Tim decided to teach ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) so he could be home more rather than deployed on flights around the country. The couple moved for his ROTC assignment at the University of Minnesota Duluth and Angie immediately began looking for a bed-and-breakfast inn to buy.

“We both have always liked to be home and working on the home,” Angie says. A B&B would give them the opportunity to do both.

They found the A.G. Thomson House on the market, which it had been for a long time. The price tag was more than \$1 million, and still this 9,000-square-foot historic house set on two acres with a carriage



TIM ALLEN

It takes a solid week of work to decorate the main house first and second floors for Christmas. This part of their year can also be very busy with guests, say A.G. Thomson House owners Angie and Tim Allen. “The week between Christmas and New Year’s is like summer,” Angie says.



DON TRUEMAN / PARAMOUNT PIXELS



house would be yet again another fixer-upper.

Quickly blending their savings, bank loans and help from generous backers, the Allens closed on the purchase before Tim retired in 2007.

Discovering more about the house’s history was one of the charms of owning an older home for Tim and Angie (see side story).

The amount of elbow grease it needs is not as charming, but since they both have solid puttering skills, it is not alarming either.

The first thing they did was paint the exterior a relaxing, inviting yellow. They tackled the landscaping and the front yard that Tim



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TIM ALLEN

Angie Allen keeps a constant eye out for treasures to deck the halls. The Allens also receive gifts of ornaments. “It’s easy to shop for us,” she jokes. The main floor sitting room and sunroom have three of the five 10-foot trees on the first floor that they put up each year.

describes as having “two thistles, no grass.” The electricity was updated and plumbing renovated.

In the rooms frequented by guests, there was basic maintenance, and updates to several guest bathrooms, with new tiling, sinks and tubs in some. They’ve added fireplaces in rooms.

The Allens also did a major remodel that has helped to keep their sanity – a refreshed, enlarged kitchen with additional counter space and a more functional arrangement with new appliances like two ovens, two dishwashers, a preparation sink and an island.

“It used to be everywhere we looked, there would be something that needed to be done,” Tim says. “Now that list is much smaller.”

All the repairs, updating and other fussing needed to be done around guests. The day that the Allens took over, there were guests to tend. “We took over seamlessly,” Angie says proudly.

Something else also needed a bit of repair. While the business continued under the former owners, because they had been so long waiting to sell, some things had slipped and unflattering reviews showed up on websites like Trip Advisor.

S U P P O R T E R S

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The Allens discovered that if they could prove to Trip Advisor that the business had new owners by showing the purchase agreement, then it would expunge old reviews and let them start fresh.

“So much of it is reputation,” explains Tim.

Today the inn is the top-rated B&B in Minnesota on Trip Advisor, which also named it in the “Top Ten Coziest Places to Stay” in the United States. This fall, the couple won a master gardener honor and their landscaping has earned awards from the local garden group.

With about 35 percent of their business coming in by word of mouth, the Allens find that most of their seven guest rooms or suites – some are in the carriage house – are occupied all year. They have taken time off here and there by hiring specialists who temporarily manage bed-and-breakfast inns so owners can get vacations. And, on rare weekend nights when there isn't a guest scheduled, they have been known to sneak off to someone else's hotel in town for a relaxing evening.

Some aspects of this full-time business have brought memorable surprises. In a serendipitous fluke this year, they found themselves celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary at the same time three couples who had rooms also celebrated theirs.

“I think one of my biggest surprises that I enjoy dealing with now,” says Angie, “is dietary restrictions.” She likes the challenge of cooking for guests with special requests, like for vegan or gluten-free meals. “Sometimes I'll have like five breakfasts going on.”

A business run in your home, with guests constantly, can be stressful on a marriage, of course. “You are together 24 hours a day,” Tim points out. But the Allens laughingly thank the large house for letting them get “away” time from each other. They've remained happily together since high school.



KONNIE LeMAY / LAKE SUPERIOR MAGAZINE

Tim and Angie Allen (top) have done several remodeling projects in the past three years on their 100-year-old home. Most of the work enhances guest and public rooms, but the kitchen was for their own sanity, they say. The outdated kitchen (at right) did not have enough space or the right mix of appliances for a busy inn. Granite counters, new cabinets, doubled dishwashers and ovens and a smoother work flow make life better.



TIM ALLEN



KONNIE LeMAY / LAKE SUPERIOR MAGAZINE

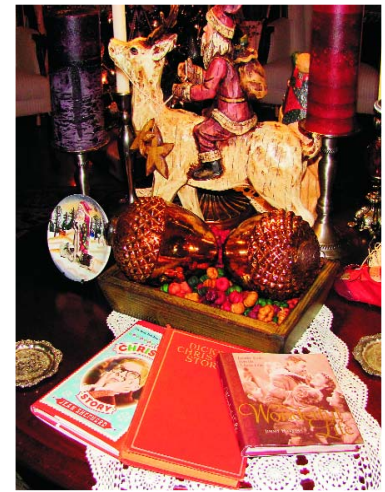


DON TRUEMAN / PARAMOUNT PIXELS

Enjoying the same things helps, like watching the Packers, working on house projects ... and sprucing up the house for Christmas.

It takes about a solid week to get all of the Christmas decorations up. They search for “skinny” trees to

put in the hallway, Tim says, to reduce the risk of curbing traffic flow. Surprisingly, with all of the fully decorated trees around, Angie says so far, “all of the ornaments that have gotten broken were broken by us.”



The main-floor sitting room makes for an inviting, cozy space with a fireplace and the “Easter egg” surprises like books of the season.

Angie is not shy about packing a room with decorations and ornamentation. She loves leaving “Easter eggs” – delightful seasonal surprises – for guests to discover in the sitting room. For example, she places out books about the film “It's

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**Holiday Open House and Outlet Store Sale**  
at 310 E. Superior St. Duluth  
Saturday, Nov. 27, 2010  
9 a.m. – 5 p.m.



KONNIE LeMAY / LAKE SUPERIOR MAGAZINE

There are four guest rooms in main house and a modern suite and two guest rooms in the carriage house. What Tim Allen calls one of his crazier ideas was putting in new hickory floors, himself, with just a couple days between guests. "I found this great deal on flooring," he chuckles, "just three days before Memorial Day." He luckily did not discover any of the "surprises" typical with old-house remodeling.

a *Wonderful Life*," and versions of Dickens' "Christmas Carol" and the traditional poem "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." They also have DVDs of many Christmas classics.

Guests, relatives and friends have been known to add to their ornament collection.

Preparing this inn reflects the Christmases they've always had in their

own homes, Angie says. "We didn't approach decorating differently."

The third floor, their private suite, does remain undecorated these days. But with so much Christmas and so many happy guests on the floors below them, they have plenty of reason to celebrate in unadorned quiet.



## A.G. Thomson House



Tim and Angie Allen have some wonderful history about their house on their website.

The Gambrel-roof style Dutch Colonial house cost was built for \$17,000 in 1909 by Minneapolis architect Edwin H. Hewitt for William N. Ryerson, general manager of Great Northern Power Company. A carriage house and other additions came later. The Thomson for whom the inn is named was Adam G. Thomson, son of Alexander Thomson, one of the largest grain exporters in the country. Adam, the second owner of this house, bought it in 1918 and lived in it with his wife, Clara, until 1925. A prominent businessman in his own right, Adam was president of the Duluth Board of Trade and of the Kelley How Thomson Company, a large hardware wholesaler with clients around the Midwest.

## Good to Know

A.G. Thomson House  
2617 E 3rd Street  
Duluth, MN 55812  
877-807-8077 / 218-724-3464  
[www.thomsonhouse.biz](http://www.thomsonhouse.biz)

Weekend room rates for two in December range from \$189 per night (2 nights required) for the small rooms to \$299 a night for the Lake Superior Suite.

The house is on the Holiday Tour of seven Duluth inns, 1-5 p.m. on December 12. Tickets, available from the inn, are \$20 in advance or \$25 at the door.