

travel

Unapologetic Fairfield

Cultural arts explode when the most eclectic place in Iowa resolves to get along.

WRITTEN BY BETH DALBEY

PHOTOS BY DUANE TINKEY

Fairfield is getting more comfortable in its skin — and, the entire truth be told, growing weary of being portrayed as a bad cliché, as the big-city media are sometimes wont to do.

The story they most often tell about the town, home for more than three decades to the Transcendental Meditation-based Maharishi University of Management, is a perhaps circulation-boosting but nevertheless worn-out account of the schism between practitioners of TM, an ancient Vedic tradition so steeped in esoteric mysticism that it seemingly invites skepticism, and a native population that leans toward conservative politics and traditional Christian values.

But, an increasing number of Fairfield residents are saying, that's so flat-earth, so last century. In this century, Fairfield is unapologetic about its eccentricities and boldly claims its lack of convention as part of its charm. With more than 60 cultures represented in its student and permanent populations and an eclectic collection of businesses to serve them, the Southeast Iowa town of 10,000 is Iowa's most culturally diverse small city. Rather than arguing about differences in the public square, leaders are promoting the city as vibrant because of its plurality.

"I hear people snicker," said Sarah Cochran, an

attorney and civic leader who's overseen projects requiring massive communitywide participation, including one to raise money for and build a block-long play structure in a city park. "Those are the ones that have never been here. Shame on them. They need to 'shill up.'"

It's as if some of the contentiousness of the past has been exhaled in a collective sigh that says, "We don't want to put our attention there anymore; we just want to move forward," said Holly Moore, who oversees the 1st Fridays Art Walk, a showcase of visual, performing, film and video, cultural, and culinary arts held year-round on the first Friday of each month. "There's such a gold mine of talent and creativity in Fairfield, why not just focus on mining the gold?"

There's no better example of the cache Fairfield uncovered when it tapped its rich vein of artistic talent than the Art Walk. Stacey Hurlin founded it in 2002 as a signature event for her Art Life Society, an organization based, as its name suggests, on the philosophy that art and life are inexorably entwined. The event matured and, likening it to "sending a child to college," she turned its management over to a non-profit board of directors that works closely with the Fairfield Convention and Visitors Bureau in positioning Fairfield as a cultural oasis. Named

1. Stacey Hurlin founded the 1st Fridays Art Walk as a way to showcase Fairfield's rich vein of artistic talent. In June, when the Society of Fairfield Italian Americans staged a cultural celebration around the Art Walk, Hurlin and a friend discussed putting on an African celebration during Art Walk, prompting the inevitable remark that Fairfield could stage an Art Walk around a particular ethnicity for 60 months before running out of options.

2 and 3. Pamela Slowick says her business, Thymely Solutions, was conceived during meditation, when she saw an image of an apothecary on the Fairfield square. A homeopathic store was needed to serve the hundreds of Fairfield residents interested in alternative remedies and she was eager to learn who would open it. She embellished the vision daily for a month, planning the most minute details, until she finally surrendered to what she believes was obvious: It would be up to her to build the business, which has grown to become one of Iowa's most complete alternative health stores. In addition to homeopathic remedies, the store's inventory includes gift items that range from those uniquely suited to Fairfield residents who practice Transcendental Meditation to some that are purely whimsical, such as lightweight dolls suspended from the ceiling.

4. Alexandra Stimson, an accomplished liturgical sculptor, begins chiseling at a slab of white marble during the 1st Fridays Art Walk in June.





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5. Holly Moore not only oversees the 1st Fridays Art Walk; she's been an important player in bridging the schism between longtime residents of Fairfield and those who came to Fairfield in the 1970s and 1980s to attend Maharishi International University, which changed its name in 1995 to Maharishi University of Management.

6. Dale Divoky, an assistant professor of art at Maharishi University of Management, received funding from the Iowa Arts Council for "Beetles and Fish — Representations of the Silence and Dynamism of Nature," a ceramic sculpture initially displayed at the Des Moines Botanical Center and featured at the 1st Fridays Art Walk in June.

7. A musician strolling the streets during the 1st Fridays Art Walk in June played the zampogna, an Italian bagpipe, in keeping with the Society of Fairfield Italian Americans' "All Things Italian" cultural celebration.

8. West Des Moines native Christopher Kufner is the owner of and chief artisan for Americus Diamond. He's also a painter and has been called "the American Monet" by critics. He uses vibrant, evocative colors in his landscapes.



8

the state's top tourism event in 2005, the Art Walk draws anywhere from several hundred to a few thousand people to the town square to tour 20 nearby galleries — some operations dedicated entirely to art, others spaces set aside within retail businesses and cafés — that have sprung up to support the some 300 Fairfield residents living at least partially on money from their artwork.

Fairfield has a long history of support for the arts through cultural groups such as the Fairfield Art Association and others centered around appreciation for music, theater and local history, and they're now profiting from the marketing nudges of new groups. The matriarchal art association and the 1st Fridays group share gallery space in a cordial relationship Moore characterizes as "the grande dames meet the new kids — and the grande dames are saying, 'You are making things happen and we want to be part of it.'"

Working in consort, Fairfield's arts groups make a powerful statement that "creative excellence is not the exclusive domain of any one group," Moore said "It's everywhere, and that's why the Art Walk is so successful.

"We're sitting on a volcano of talent that didn't have a regular sort of venue," she said. "This town is just popping."

That's sort of like saying that Fairfield is a little bit diverse.

June's Art Walk drew the largest crowd to date in the four-year history of the event. Organizers estimated that around 3,000 people spilled from the stores and galleries lining the perimeter of Fairfield's Central Park, a charming icon of small-town America with rose-lined sidewalks leading like spokes to the gazebo hub. The Society of Fairfield Italian Americans was putting on "All Things Italian," a robust cultural celebration resplendent with a tenor who sang opera with perfect pitch from the gazebo stage, leisurely bocce ball games on the lawn nearby and Mediterranean fare at most of Fairfield's delicious array of ethnic restaurants — French, Asian, Mexican, Middle Eastern — which played up the "All Things Italian" theme by changing their names to something from the language of romance for the evening.

Alexandra Pelizzari Stimson, an accomplished liturgical sculptor, set up shop in the street and was chiseling a slab of white marble extracted from the mines

near Carrara, Italy, where she had worked at the Carlo Nicoli Sculpture Studios, one of Tuscany's famed carving studios. Onlookers watched with fascination as a shape took form, wondering, perhaps, if the face of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Christ would be revealed by her carving. Stimson's husband, Mark, and two of their children, also artists of some reputation, were exhibiting their oil paintings and other works in the vast upstairs ballroom of Morning Star Studio, one of Fairfield's cultural hot spots.

Brian and Jewel McDonald renovated the building into classrooms, studios and performing arts venues after the American Legion post abandoned it when the steep stairs proved too difficult for its aging members to ascend. The ballroom is used regularly for dancing — waltz, rumba, tango, Kathak (the classical dance of Northern India), contra, English country and Irish set; you name it and Fairfielders probably know the moves — and for concerts and regular open-mike nights revealing a surprisingly deep level of professional musical talent in Fairfield. Brian "Hurricane" McDonald, whose résumé includes playing harmonica for the band Stray Cats, and his friend Jeffrey Hedquist get the microphones warmed up on those nights. Hedquist is a guy who's good at so many things — music, stand-up comedy, radio advertising — that it saves time to just call him a virtuoso. He even shared the stage with legendary folk singer Pete Seeger four years ago in a Chicago Earth Day event honoring Seeger with a lifetime achievement award in environmentalism.

On the southwest corner of the square in Americus Diamond, the Impressionist paintings of owner and chief artisan Christopher Kufner are, as usual, drawing an admiring crowd. Kufner, a West Des Moines native and a largely self-taught artist, has been called "the American Monet." Kufner's work is distinguished from that of the great French master by the bold hues he chooses — the vivid pinks and purples of sunsets on those rare occasions when atmospheric conditions are perfectly aligned. His canvases, selling in the four-figure range, often depict the pastoral scenes of Fairfield's rural countryside — a large round hay bale set on a gently sloping meadow, for example — or reflect the time Kufner spent in Europe.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 176

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119

A block and a half north, Julie Stephens and the staff at Revelations Café and Used Bookstore are barely keeping pace with orders from customers seated at tables wedged among the shelves of used books that fill the two-story building and at café tables set up on the sidewalk to handle the overflow. Stephens opened Revelations as a bookstore with her mother and two sisters in 1996 and began serving customers coffee and other specialty drinks, as well as pizza they'd learned to make in the brick oven a previous tenant had installed. Reinventing itself in typical Fairfield fashion to meet market demands, Revelations now offers a full menu of sandwiches, soups and salads made from locally grown organic produce and its owners are among the most enthusiastic cheerleaders of the Practical Farmers of Iowa's "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" initiative in a town full of champions of local food systems.

"Rev," Moore said, using a pet name for the popular lunch, dinner and just plain hanging-out spot, "is always busy." On Art Walk Fridays, though, it teems with a multigenerational, multicultural crowd. "It's a good excuse for the whole town to come out and focus on art," Stephens said, "and we're a starting point for that."

Before the June Art Walk came to its close — it officially ends at 9:30, but crowds linger well into the night in warm weather — the bustling scene at Revelations has been replicated all over town.

"Something about the 1st Fridays Art Walk has spread a more ecumenical feeling, a feeling that we are all in this together, a feeling of commonality," said Tim Hawthorne, who was seated at Revelations at a table with a group of friends he's known for 20 years. "There are so many people coming out to honor the arts, and you don't see that a lot of places. It speaks to the sophistication of Iowans, and of a lot of Fairfield natives becoming more comfortable [with residents associated with the TM movement]."

"To a certain extent, it's just a mellowing of people on both sides of the mediator line," said attorney Myron Gookin, a Fairfield native and city councilman for the past decade. "We're looking at people as neighbors and friends. We now have people who came to Fairfield to be part of the TM movement and university who have raised

their children from birth to adulthood here. Fairfield is their hometown, and it's the only place they've ever known. We're just mixing it up."

Cochran, Gookin's law partner, said Fairfield is no different from other communities that reach a critical juncture and must choose a new path. "It's kind of bumpy, and there may be some puddles," she said, "but I think for the most part we've worked through a lot of our growing pains."

GROUP THERAPY

Change didn't occur overnight. Many in town credit Mayor Ed Malloy with providing the leadership to help the town bridge its differences. A New Yorker who came to Fairfield in 1980 to attend the university, he'd served on the city council for several years before running unsuccessfully for mayor in 1997 in an ugly campaign marked by red herrings about what Malloy's affiliation with the TM movement might portend for Fairfield and some verbal skirmishes. Malloy recalls it as a period of embarrassment for the town, but others say it was a watershed moment, a time when longtime residents on both sides decided to look honestly at the toll years of infighting had taken on Fairfield.

"Leadership has to take responsibility for bringing all those parties that will build consensus together," Malloy said. "If division is the condition of your stagnation, that's what will continue to exist."

"We thought we had worked through those things, but they came to surface one last time," he said. "Everybody was a little older and wiser and ready to deal with it in adult ways."

So, the town put itself through group therapy of a sort. It was a cathartic process conducted over several years under the umbrella of an official community relations committee and was open to anyone who wanted to leave cultural bias behind and possibly even laugh at how peculiar yagas and yajinas and yogic flying — or lovingly caring for 4-H livestock for a year and then selling them for slaughter — might seem when viewed in isolation and not as part of a larger tradition.

"I know I realized I could be a better community member," said Moore, who came to Fairfield in 1980 to attend Maharishi International University, as the college was known until its name change in 1995. "I couldn't

9. Fairfield Mayor Ed Malloy, now in his third term, believes the city's cultural clashes of the past resulted more from a stagnation of leadership than from irreconcilable differences between residents.



10. Rising out of the prairie is Maharishi Vedic City, Iowa's newest city. Incorporated in July 2001, it was designed "as a model of ideal city life," according to the city's official Web site. Vedic comes from the Sanskrit word "veda," which means knowledge. The city's name also honors the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who popularized Transcendental Meditation in the United States and whose most famous pupils have included members of the Beatles and the Beach Boys. Some of the Beach Boys still maintain close ties to Fairfield and the surrounding area.



11. Luci Ismert heads Fairfield's Convention and Visitors Bureau. Within 10 years, she expects the city to emerge as one of Iowa's top 10 tourist destinations. Sidewalk cafés and ethnic cuisine help give Fairfield an international feel, she says.



12. Built in 1893 in Richardsonian Romanesque style, the Jefferson County Courthouse was without its steeple for almost half of its life. The spire was ripped from the building by a violent storm in October 1949, but was replaced in November 2004 thanks to \$50,000 raised from the community to honor the 90th birthday of Lee Gobble. Gobble, whose ancestors were early Jefferson County pioneers, was one of the first in Fairfield to extend a welcome to students and faculty of Maharishi International University in the 1970s.



keep ignoring the place where I live, and it was a combination of a lot of people thinking a lot like that — that we needed to get to know each other on a one-to-one level."

By the time Malloy ran for mayor again in 2001, his association with the TM movement barely registered a quickening of the community pulse. He won easily, turning a 14-term incumbent out of office. He was re-elected without opposition in 2003 and 2005.

When he took office, collaboration was occurring between different groups, but "it just wasn't happening on a big enough scale," Malloy said. "There were enough leaders from all sides — native and newer — who were willing to come together and plan what is best for Fairfield's long-term health and security, and that led to really opening the door to the consideration of bigger ideas, more creative ideas and more collaboration."

He appointed a committee representative of Fairfield's diversity to chart a new direction in a "shared vision" plan for 2012. The blueprint they developed reinforces the usual values listed in community vision statements — education, recreational opportunities, the preservation of idyllic small-town charm and the like — but, more important, it makes affirmative statements about the values of "harmony and respect" among a diverse population and of the opportunities to exploit Fairfield's unique identity to promote the community.

For the first time since the university opened in 1974, Fairfield was saying loudly and clearly that the influx of a couple thousand new residents who also happen to practice TM was a gift.

"We're really just not allowing agendas to surface in discussions we have for the whole community," Malloy said. "If they're not common agendas, we're not dealing with them. People are putting a lot of fun and heart into it, they respect what needs to be respected, and it's allowed those real creative driving forces, individuals or groups, to step forward and be part of the process."

ENTREPRENEURIAL TO BEGIN WITH

How a new spirit of cooperation was sparked among people with vastly divergent interests and customs may be instructive for other communities on the cusp of change, especially as Iowa becomes more ethnically diverse and the idea of the creative

economy — popularized by economist Richard Florida, who might well have been writing about Fairfield in "The Rise of the Creative Class" — take hold.

"We really are a good example of how you can overcome differences and embrace the value of diversity, as opposed to leaning into the differences," Moore said. "We still have relationships to forge and all that, but I like where we are right now — a quickening of everyone 'getting' our potential and deciding to contribute."

Added Hawthorne, whose company, hawthorne direct inc., started with a single infomercial and is now the world's premier direct-response television advertising agency: "Fairfield has survived by its wits and by its creativity. It's a microcosm for the way America is going to be going, as so much of the manufacturing is going away."

Fairfield is known nationally for a fearless entrepreneurial spirit that has been both hailed for successes that are seemingly incongruous with Iowa's agricultural and manufacturing base, and mocked because business triumph sometimes comes after a series of false starts. Burt Chojnowski, a business consultant who has served on state of Iowa venture capital boards and saw his own telecommunications company toppled by market volatility, said Fairfield is "way past the stigma of failed businesses."

"It hasn't been because of not trying hard enough or not being smart enough. Sometimes it's the market or other external factors, and sometimes people just need to learn their lessons," he said. "Most people who got knocked down and kicked around got dirty and then they got up."

Developing the town's cultural and social capital is more or less a matter of applying some of the same innovative approaches that have made Fairfield an entrepreneurial center, said Chojnowski. In doing so, it's important to remember that Fairfield has been entrepreneurial for as long as it has existed — a message made clear in Fairfield's application to become a pilot city for the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs' Iowa Great Places initiative, which assists communities in cultivating unique and authentic qualities that make them special places to work and live. The public presentation inventoried an exhaustive list of the town's assets and resources, some apparent and others more obscure. The



Facing page: A Fairfield youngster tries his skill at the Italian lawn game of bocce ball during the "All Things Italian" cultural celebration in June.

Marie-Helene Tourenne and her son, Matthieu, delight guests at their restaurant, Petit Paris, with authentic French cuisine and friendly conversation.



A Taste of Fairfield

If a visit to Fairfield that doesn't include at least one meal from its eclectic collection of restaurants isn't a sin, it should be. Fairfield, which claims more restaurants per capita than San Francisco and has a full menu of international fare, must be tasted to be fully appreciated.

One of the most celebrated eateries is a relative newcomer, Petit Paris Restaurant & Café, which uses organic ingredients for its authentic French crepes, quiches, gourmet sandwiches, French soups and, of course, the desserts and delicate pastries for which the French are known. The sweets are so good, proprietor Marie-Helene Tourenne said, that small portions are satisfying, proving the adage that "French women don't get fat."

Tourenne, who came to Fairfield in 1979 with her husband, Christian, a physics teacher at Maharishi University of Management, already had a reputation around town for being a very, very good cook, so when she opened the restaurant with her son, Matthieu, in 2004, community expectations were high.

"In the beginning, it was a little lunch place for my son," she said in an accent still heavy with her native French. "Neither of us had any experience, and we were not going to jump into something big. We learned very quickly that people wanted more."

On a recent family trip back to their home in France, the Bassin d'Arcachon on

the Atlantic coast near Bordeaux, the Tourennes stumbled upon the core of the Mas Déu winery, established as a Knights Templar commandery in 1137. The Mas Déu label was well known in the 1700s and 1800s throughout Europe and historians say its Muscat wine was ordered by Avignon Pope Benedict XIII and the queen of Aragon and was called the "best wine in France" by President James Monroe before the vineyard was broken into smaller pieces. Mas Déu is now a very small vineyard producing award-winning wines by employing the same methods the Knights Templar used in the 12th century, and Petit Paris is going through the regulatory process with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to become the exclusive U.S. distributor of seven varieties produced under the label.

Tourenne said she and her son are figuring out as they go along some of the nuances of the restaurant business, but customers won't notice their inexperience. "The food we know how to do really well," she said. "We sure can do the food, and we know where to find the wine."

The authentic French cuisine isn't the only reason to make dinner plans at Petit Paris. Tourenne is a charming hostess who spends time at each table chatting happily with guests. "As is the case with so many in Fairfield, making people happy is just something that adds spice," she said. "I see their delighted faces and I am in heaven."

Another great choice is Regina's, a fine-dining restaurant in a rehabilitated factory building. It is known for its steaks, filet mignon, and market-fresh salmon cooked and served on a flaming cedar plank, but occasionally look for more exotic entrées such as quail. Afterward, stop by Café Paradiso in the same building for espresso, latte, cappuccino, brevé and other specialty drinks made from organic coffee beans roasted on site. The restaurant also serves homemade pastries and panini.

Fairfield's reputation for international cuisine has been built by three Indian restaurants, two Thai restaurants, two Chinese restaurants, a Mexican restaurant and several offering Mediterranean fare.

Vegetarians will find what they're looking for at Everybody's, an organic whole-foods store and restaurant, that's well-known for its international vegetarian buffet. The restaurant at The Raj, nationally recognized as one of the top spas and health centers in the United States located in Maharishi Vedic City north of Fairfield, also serves a delicious vegetarian buffet.

Many of the restaurants in Fairfield use organic dairy products produced at the local Radiance Dairy owned by Francis and Susan Thicke, who are pioneers in Iowa's organic farming movement.

For more information on Fairfield restaurants, go to www.fairfieldiow.com/chamber/business.

application was denied, but Fairfield appeared before state officials as a house united.

The presentation offered strong parallels bridging Fairfield's past and future. For example, a discussion of kalashes — golden ornamentations resembling a Hershey's kiss that top off the community's growing inventory of buildings constructed according Sthapatya Veda (pronounced sta-pot-yuh vay-duh) architectural principles — inevitably includes talk about cupolas, ventilating structures used for the first time in Fairfield by The Loudon Co., recalled by history as an important player in the industrialization of agriculture.

The link to the past is more than a symbolic gesture of good will. Half a century before Tim Hawthorne was proving that feature-length infomercials could be made in Iowa as easily as in California and before Earl Kaplan was selling books from his car on the way to building Books Are Fun into a business Reader's Digest would acquire in 1999 for \$380 million, William Loudon was tinkering around with an overhead monorail and crane. The system would revolutionize manufacturing, help the defense industry meet demand through two world wars and assist NASA in the delicate handling of its Apollo rocket booster, and including the entrepreneurial efforts of Loudon and countless other examples of innovation throughout Fairfield's pre-M.U.M. history in presentations about the communities has been a healing salve.

ENTERTAINING FAIRFIELD

In some respects, entrepreneurship and what Chojnowski calls "art-preneurship" are two sides of the same coin, one incomplete without the other. For example, Hawthorne's infomercial company, whose elite roster of clients includes Nikon, Mercedes-Benz USA, Apple Computer, Nissan, Time-Life and even the U.S. Navy, has lured people like Randal K. West, who left tony Brentwood, Calif., in 2000 to become the company's creative director. Just as surely as Hawthorne direct is prospering from the work of a top television industry professional, Fairfield culture is the beneficiary as West remains faithful to a first and enduring love: musical theater.

An accomplished choreographer, director and producer who spent five years collaborating with Stephen Sondheim and George Furth on their Broadway



Getting there

Fairfield is about 115 miles from Des Moines International Airport. Take Iowa 5 South to Carlisle (Exit 72), turn left on to Iowa 5 South/Iowa 92 East, continue to follow for 32 miles before merging onto Iowa 163 East at Oskaloosa. The highway becomes U.S. 63 South. Continue traveling south for 20 miles until the freeway ends. Turn right on U.S. 63 South and take it through Ottumwa to U.S. 34 East, continue east for about 25 miles to Fairfield. The town square, where most of the 1st Fridays Art Walk events are held, fronts U.S. 34.

Special note: Be prepared for some disruptions or delays due to road construction on U.S. 34.

The Raj Health Spa, located north of Fairfield in Maharishi Vedic City, draws visitors from around the world who want to take advantage of its rejuvenation programs and enjoy its quiet pastoral beauty.



While you're there

Other attractions

THE RAJ HEALTH SPA

Located north of Fairfield in Maharishi Vedic City, The Raj is world renowned for its anti-aging, cleansing and detoxification, healing, fertility, and meditation programs. It is the only such spa outside India built specifically to offer traditional ayurveda rejuvenation treatments, and it was built in accordance with ancient architectural principles known as Sthapatya Veda. Encompassing 36,000 square feet, it is located on an elegant French country-style estate. Its guests have included Bianca Jagger, Alan Arkin and Mike Love of The Beach Boys. The Raj has consistently been named one of the best spas in the country by such publications as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Town and Country, Spa-finder Healing Lifestyles & Spas, Body & Soul, Executive Health and Wellness. Packages are based on a per diem rate of \$645. For more information, go to www.theraj.com.

THE VILLAGES OF VAN BUREAN

As Fairfield takes a sometimes New Age, futuristic view, its neighbors to the south in Van Buren County are pinning their futures on the past. There are no fast-food restaurants in the Villages of Van Buren — Keosauqua (the largest with a population of 1,060), Birmingham, Bentonsport,

Bonaparte, Cantril, Douds, Farmington, Lebanon, Milton, Mount Sterling, Selma and Stockport — and there isn't a single stoplight in the county. What there is plenty of is charm. The sparsely populated county offers some of the best scenery in the state and is a spectacular place to view fall foliage. Of special interest is the Forest Craft and Scenic Drive Festival Oct. 14-15. Each of the villages offers something different. Be sure not to miss the historic Des Moines River towns of Bentonsport and Bonaparte, both of which are national historic districts and have changed little since their days as important riverboat stops. For more information, visit www.800.tourvbc.com.

Where to stay

LANDMARK INN

Chris Beckley displays his photographs, which include a stunning display of the aurora borealis photographed from a Fairfield lake, in lobby of the Landmark Inn, which he renovated with his brother. As the old Fairfield Hotel, it wasn't much to brag about. Reincarnated as the Landmark Inn, it offers charming yet affordable rooms and is close to the 1st Fridays Art Walk action as Fairfield's only downtown hotel. For more information, go to www.FairfieldLandmarkInn.com, or call 641.472.4152.

RUKMAPURA PARK HOTEL

Where else but in the Fairfield area can a guest stay in a hotel that is designed to promote health, happiness and affluence? The Rukmapura Park Hotel in Maharishi Vedic City was built in accordance with the architectural principles of Sthapatya Veda, which is said to promote those qualities. Built in the tradition of European country inns, the hotel offers quietly elegant suites in magnificent spruce and pine. One-bedroom suites are available for \$119 to \$129 per night. Villas are available for extended stays. For more information, visit www.rukmapura.com or call 866.472.1008.

BEST WESTERN FAIRFIELD INN

For more information, visit www.bestwesternfairfieldinn.com, or call 641.472.2200.

SUPER 8

For more information, visit www.super8.com or call 641.469.2000.

ECONOMY INN

For more information, call 641.472.4152.

musical "Merrily We Roll Along," West hasn't wanted for cultural opportunities in Fairfield. He co-founded The Encore Players, a company of eight of Iowa's best professionally trained performers, to tour the state and familiarize Iowans with the exceptional quality theatergoers can expect at the Jefferson County Civic Center.

The Encore Players' current tour, "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)," played opening night in Fairfield to the creators of the Broadway hit, Joanne Bogart and Eric Rockwell, and other members of their creative team. (Such a notable audience is not unusual in Fairfield, where residents never know who will show up for spiritual renewal. For example, The Raj, an ayurveda spa north of Fairfield in the newly incorporated Maharishi Vedic City and one of the country's most highly regarded spas, has counted Bianca Jagger, Alan Arkin and Mike Love of The Beach Boys among its guests.)

BEYOND IDIOSYNCRASIES

The new civic center currently under construction is a monument to Fairfield's creative energy, according to Malloy. "It is a structural symbol of what we all recognize the community would most benefit from, a platform to display creativity — artistic, business and social entrepreneurship, every facet of the community," he said. "The way the whole community came out to support that vision [by passing a 1 percent sales tax referendum] is recognition of the commitment we have to celebrate our diversity."

The performing arts center's success will depend largely on whether tourism officials can convince the rest of Iowa that Fairfield has something to offer beyond its well-publicized idiosyncrasies.

Luci Ismert, executive director of the start-up Fairfield Convention and Visitors Bureau, is betting that they can and that within a decade, Fairfield will emerge as one of Iowa's top 10 tourist destinations. She'd just stepped off one of the two tour buses that had come to Southeast Iowa for the June Art Walk and other regional attractions, among them the Gothic House in nearby Eldon; Maharishi Vedic City, Iowa's newest city located five miles from Fairfield; and the charming, laid-back Villages of Van Buren.

Ismert worked at the Ottumwa visitors bureau



Dian Gilmore

Dian Gilmore moved to Fairfield in March to become the executive vice president of the Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce and its sister organization, the Fairfield Economic Development Association. She said she loves the vibrant and energetic atmosphere of the 1st Fridays Art Walks and finds it difficult to believe Fairfield residents ever engaged in cultural sparring.

“The whole community is out, everyone is having a good time.”

before coming to Fairfield, but has spent most of her life on the West Coast. Ottumwa is 22 miles from Fairfield, but the two communities might as well be oceans apart for all they have in common, Ismert said.

"I don't think there's another community in Iowa like Fairfield," she said. "All I ever heard was that Fairfield was different or weird, and when my husband and I came to an Art Walk, it reminded me of being back on the West Coast in Portland or a beach community.

"Fairfield feels good," she said, providing a delicious double-entendre.

Fairfield feels good to residents and to visitors, of course, but increasingly, it feels good about itself. ■