

IowaLife



There are more famous lowans than one might think DesMoinesRegister.com/famouslowans

E DEAR ABBY 2E | MISS MANNERS 2E | TELEVISION 3E | HOROSCOPES 4E | COMICS 4E-5E | CROSSWORD 5E DesMoinesRegister.com/life



HARRY BAUMERT/REGISTER PHOTOS

Colleen Bell, left, is intrigued by the ball python that Gina Wolfe brought to the First Friday Art Walk in Fairfield in August. The event included a pet parade.

Fairfield celebrates Fridays

Get a kick from Kukuumba Lime Juice, munch walnut burgers at monthly festival

By MICHAEL MORAIN
mmorain@dmrreg.com

Fairfield, Ia. — At first glance, the town square to-do looks like every other small-town carnival.

A blues band pumps out tunes from the gazebo. Girl Scouts paint faces at a booth nearby. Kids are blowing bubbles, crafters are selling quilts, and community groups — the Lions, the Kiwanis, the Jaycees — are all here, serving Sloppy Joes and ice cream and hefty slices of apple pie.

Unlike many festivals, however, Fairfield's First Friday Art Walks don't fade from the calendar when the first leaves start to fall. The southeast Iowa town of 10,000 people hosts thousands of visitors the first Friday of every month, regardless of weather, for a party that reflects not only the community's Main Street charm but also its unique mix of artists, health seekers and spiritual immigrants. The overall effect looks like something Norman Rockwell might have painted had he spent some time in the Peace Corps.

One vendor, for example, sells handwoven bags from Colombia. Someone else serves glasses of a cucumber-flavored potion called Binghamon Kukuumba Lime Juice near a tent where Deborah Williamson grills organic

FRIDAYS, PAGE 3E



Mary Shepard and Angel, her cockatoo, line up for the pet parade that was judged during the festivities last month.

First Friday Art Walk

WHEN: 6-10 p.m.
Friday

WHERE: Downtown Fairfield. In case of rain, outdoor events will relocate to the Armory, at Broadway and B streets.

ADMISSION: Free

DETAILS: (641) 472-2111, fairfieldartwalk.com

ONLINE: See an audio slideshow of last month's Art Walk, featuring a pet parade, at DesMoinesRegister.com/multimedia.

FRIDAYS

FROM PAGE 1E

walnut burgers.

"That's what it's all about: experiencing the best of the community," said Williamson, who last year opened the organic, vegetarian restaurant Small Planet just off the square.

On any given day, visitors to Fairfield can stroll through dozens of thriving art galleries, book stores and coffee shops.

They can eat their fill at any of the vegetarian cafes scattered throughout downtown or stroll through the impressive Fairfield Arts and Convention Center that locals opened last year across from the Jefferson County Courthouse.

Nearby in Vedic City, visitors can tour the spas, organic greenhouses and spiritually designed homes where the followers of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi practice Transcendental Meditation.

There's plenty to see any time of the year, but, Williamson said, "You have to come on First Fridays. It's more fun than any other time."

The event began without a lot of fanfare in October 2002 when a group called



The square in Fairfield is a lively place with music, art booths, food and games and plenty of out-of-town visitors.

HARRY BAUMERT/REGISTER PHOTOS

ArtLife Society rounded up a few artists and gallery owners to promote local talent. There was a good crowd, but few predicted how the project would grow.

"I thought, 'This'll work until the weather gets cold,'" longtime Fairfield resident Bonnie Thompson said.

But the party returned in November and December, when organizers decked the square in holiday decorations and lights.

"It was absolutely gorgeous," Thompson said. "It was the biggest crowd we'd ever had."

The crowds kept coming. During the next few

years, the event became a fixture on calendars. Locals encouraged out-of-town friends and family members to plan their trips around First Fridays, and many returned month after month.

By the time state officials named the Art Walks the Iowa Tourism event of the year in 2005, thousands of visitors were showing up for the party every month.

Executive director Cathy Wadsworth estimated that a record-breaking 3,500 visitors crowded the square for the Italian-themed June event. That's a smaller crowd than the 15,000- or 20,000-member hordes that descend on small towns along the route for the Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa, but it still takes a lot of work — and it happens year-round.

"We just run to keep up," Wadsworth said.

Last month, when organizers hosted the first pet parade, Wadsworth and volunteers scrambled to register almost four dozen dogs — and at least one 4-foot python, named Angel — in a costume contest. Animals and their owners crowded around in a tangle



Father Rich Hall, left, and Father Tom Miller, with St. Gabriel and All Angels Catholic Church, bless a canine in Fairfield on Aug. 1.

of leashes as an announcer doled out awards for Best Behaved, Best Groomed and Most Like the Owner.

Two Catholic priests blessed animals for a freewill donation, and pet psychics offered readings under a tent nearby.

"People loved the pet psychics," Wadsworth said. "We literally took their tent away from them, and they were still doing readings at 9:30. That was the biggest surprise of the night."

But this is Fairfield, after all. Surprises are part of the routine.



The Register

Friday's highlights

- Wine tasting, with samples from Keosauqua-based Whispering Pines Winery on the northeast side of the square; 6-9 p.m.
- Unveiling and dedication of a collaborative mural at 7:30 p.m. at the Fairfield Arts and Convention Center.
- A lecture and book-signing with chef Kurt Michael Friese, author of "Slow Food in the Heartland," on the northwest side of the square; 7 and 8 p.m.
- Information from the Department of Natural Resources about recycling and composting.
- A silent auction and drawings for items donated by local businesses.
- A petting zoo, pony rides and hayrack rides.
- Activity booths for painting pumpkins, decorating tote bags and learning about geology.
- Homemade bread, lasagna, chili, apple pie and more, all made with local ingredients.
- Open houses at dozens of local art galleries and studios.

Monthly themes

Fairfield hosts First Friday Art Walks year-round and features a different theme each month.

- September:** Buy Fresh, Buy Local
- October:** Oktoberfest
- November:** Religious Art and Stained Glass
- December:** Gingerbread Extravaganza
- January:** Winter Wonderland
- February:** Film, Festival and Photography Expo
- March:** Youth Art Festival
- April:** Art in Motion (dance)
- May:** Juried Art Show
- June:** All Things Italian
- July:** Party in the Park
- August:** Bark in the Park



Narayani Thijm, 8, makes a giant bubble as her brother, Kishan, 10, watches during the August Art Walk on the square in Fairfield. Children's activities on that Friday also included face painting, sidewalk chalk and a parachute game. Themes differ every month.