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## Fairfield celebrates Fridays

BY MICHAEL MORAIN • MMORAIN@DMREG.COM • SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

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**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 up Sloppy Joes and ice cream and hefty slices of apple pie.

### ► SLIDE SHOW: Fairfield Fridays

Unlike many festivals, however, Fairfield's First Friday Art Walks don't fade away from the calendar when the first leaves start to fall. The southeast Iowa town of 10,000 hosts thousands of visitors the first Friday of every month, come rain or shine or snow, for a party that reflects not only the community's Main Street charm but its unique mix of artists, health seekers and spiritual immigrants. The overall effect looks like something Norman Rockwell might have painted if he'd 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 Binghimon Kukuumba Lime Juice near a tent where Deborah Williamson grills organic 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.

### Art galleries, coffee shops, spas and more

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, said Williamson, "You gotta 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 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.

### What about when the weather goes south?

"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 out the square in holiday decorations and lights.

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

And the crowds kept coming. During the next few years, the event became a fixture on calendars in Fairfield and the surrounding area. 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 Art Walk in June. 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 hard work - and it happens year-round, come rain or shine or snow.

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

### Pet parade was howling success

Last month, when organizers hosted the first pet parade, Wadsworth and volunteers scrambled to register almost four dozen dogs - and at least one four-foot python, named Angel - in a costume contest. Animals and their owners crowded around in a tangle of leashes as an announcer doled out awards for Best Behaved, Best Groomed and Most Like the Owner.



HARRY BAUMERT/REGISTER PHOTOS

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

### 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

**INFO:** (641) 472-2111.

### Friday's highlights include:

- 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



Mary Shepard and Angel, her cockatoo, line up for the pet parade that was judged during the Aug. 1 festivities.



A pair of Catholic priests blessed animals for a freewill donation, and pet psychics offered readings under a tent nearby. "People loved the pet psychics," Wadsworth said later. "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.

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Colleen Bell, left, is intrigued by the ball python that Gina Wolfe brought to a First Friday Art Walk in Fairfield on Aug. 1. The event included a pet parade.

**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 Art Walk on the square in Fairfield on Aug. 1. Children's activities on that Friday also included face painting, sidewalk chalk and a parachute game.

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
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