



Wabash shines on

Well-loved little city
bright with good ideas

The Wabash County Historical Museum does a wonderful job of recreating the awe and delight of the moment at 8 p.m. March 31, 1880, when the switch was flipped to illuminate four huge arc lights that had been installed atop the courthouse tower, thereby earning Wabash the title of "First Electrically Lighted City in the World."

That event delighted the more than 10,000 people who had gathered to witness the historic occasion.

Today, Wabash delights easily more than a quarter of a million people a year with its roster of attractions (from the beauties of nature to top stage and musical performers) and events (from shopping in historic downtown buildings to sampling more chili than you can find in one place at one time anywhere east of the Mississippi).

Wabash is a bright beacon still rising up onto the high bluff overlooking the Wabash River where it came into being during a series of negotiations, land purchases and inspired public project building dating from the early 1800s.

Wabash County Convention and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Whitney Myers still counts as a newcomer to the town, though her husband is a native, and she finds her vantage point valuable in her work.

"I see things as a visitor would," she said. "When I first was coming to Wabash with my husband, he never said a word about what there was to do here. He grew up here, and it was so commonplace to him."

Her reaction, she said, on learning about the arts and cultural events, the museum, the well-preserved downtown and even the waterfalls was an incredulous "Are you serious?!" She could not understand why all the natives weren't brimming over with the enthusiasm for the town that she had just discovered. As a consequence, she is having a lot of fun in her job.

Now, of course, she has met and joined forces with the Wabash natives who share her enthusiasm.

"There are so many fun things to come that it's exciting," she said.

On a day trip to Wabash, she said, visitors have to carefully choose what to do "because you can't do it all." She calculates that a three- or four-day stay would be about right to really enjoy what Wabash and its surroundings have to offer: "A show at the Honeywell Center, going to Manchester College, the two covered bridges, going to Eagle Theater," she ticks off a suggested itinerary. "And our museum here is a good solid two-hours visit."

Then there's the downtown. Wabash has an intact 19th and early 20th century downtown with many building facades beautifully restored thanks to state grants. Its shops range from a place where you can buy safes to an independent bookstore and The Francis Shoppe, known throughout Northeast and Central Indiana as THE place to go for bridesmaid and mother of the bride dresses in addition to high-quality

women's clothing for all occasions. Antique shops and galleries tempt shoppers with everything from coins and collectibles to furniture and jewelry and paintings by local artists. The Charley Creek Inn's restaurant Twenty, the Market Street Grill, Aztecaz Mexican restaurant and quirky Modoc's are attractive dining destinations.

The Charley Creek Inn has been in the news lately because Richard Ford won the prestigious Cook Cup for its top-to-bottom restoration, but Modoc's has the best story behind it. It's named for a runaway circus elephant that rampaged through and around town for days before being safely recaptured.

"We have people come from all over who are just blown away by our downtown," Myers said. "Downtown is amazing."

Myers has spotted something important happening in Wabash that is also enlivening its downtown.

"We have so many people in their 30s who are starting families and moved back to raise their families, to start a new business or to join an established one," she said. "I think that says a lot. They are getting away from the Chicagos and Indys to a certain extent. You don't often see people our age coming back to a community this size."

Richard Ford, a native son whose Charley Creek Foundation is one of the main engines of Wabash's continual reinvention, agrees the young adults are an important factor. Ford is widely praised for all he has done and is doing for Wabash, and he calls this volunteer career he undertook after earlier work experience at his family's company, Ford Meter Box, and at the federal Environmental Protection Agency in its infancy, "far and away the most satisfying work I have ever had."

He has noticed how "it never seems to let up.

"I'm not really complaining," he explained. "One thing leads to another."

It's synergy with the visions and resources of other people that makes the stars line up right for Wabash so often, he said. He cites Todd Minnich, executive director of the Honeywell Foundation, as central to Wabash's success. "He is the one that has the vision and background," Ford said, "and he's a very clever booking person for the center's theater." The Honeywell Center adds a modern architectural note to Wabash's downtown without in any way clashing with the overall look.

"We are fortunate that we have an intact turn of the century downtown," Ford

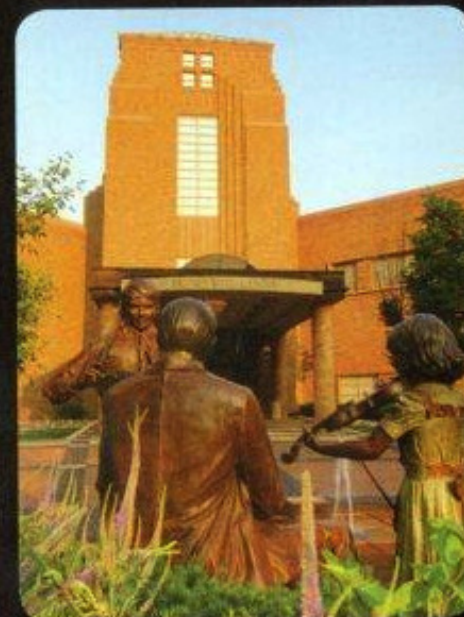


PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE WABASH COUNTY CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA NIEMELAKI@ZITTINGHOUSE.COM



PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA NUNIKNER, TUTTENDIENAL.COM



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE WABASH COUNTY CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

said. "It's like when you go to Prague and they explain that there was not much war damage and under the Soviets no money was spent to tear down buildings.

"In the case of Wabash, we have had no major fires for the past 120-130 years, and the town and the old buildings are intact. With the preservation movement and education, people are realizing now how beautiful the buildings looked originally and are going back to that look."

Myers is thrilled that people her age are buying downtown buildings, restoring them meticulously and preparing them as retail space on the ground level and apartments above. Ford says enough has already been done locally that a few out-of-town developers have begun to show interest.

"It used to be everybody's dream to leave Wabash and get a job in Indianapolis or Chicago," he said. "That was back when you could get jobs. If you're creative, it's easier to find a job down here, and you can certainly live on a lot less." He hopes Wabash's downtown is on the verge of a large-scale revitalization.

Wabash native Jeannie Fulkerson, who has retired to Winona Lake, appreciates all the care that goes into her hometown and relishes her childhood memories of the place.

"It's a much quieter town now," she said. "The industries have slacked off and everyone's making adjustments. But Wabash has had a unique history, and people who love the town are willing to be the benefactor. It's a very unusual town in that some really prominent citizens wanted to invest in the wellbeing of the whole town."

She tells a story about Mark C. Honeywell, whose business success enabled

him to establish the foundation and build the cultural center that bears his name today. Honeywell, she said, when he built anything (as he did with his personal gardens as well as in town) "would build it as labor-intensive as possible to give as many people as possible jobs. That's why we have cement bridges looking like logs with bark on them."

Fulkerson's father, Joseph Nixon, ran the Wabash Plain Dealer, one of the chain of 11 Nixon newspapers in the state. Her mother was from a newspaper family in Kokomo. The newspapers campaigned for the construction of the two flood control reservoirs, Salamonie and Mississinewa.

Fulkerson remembers her mother describing being picked up and taken to work in a rowboat during one of Wabash's many floods. Flooding is far less of a problem now, and the river has become even more of an asset for the town.

"They have the river and they are using it now. They have a river walk and great recreational activities and parks and Salamonie and Frances Slocum forests," she said.

Fulkerson says Wabash's history is filled with "a lot of very strong people, and they've tried to preserve the best parts of being a small town: the churches, schools, country club and the farming community. It's a real stable place."

Myers knows the stability is precious, but she also knows it's possible for stability to strangle a town. She's not worried about Wabash losing its shine.

"People want that smaller town — not necessarily Andy Griffith-Mayberry — feel," she said, "more forward-thinking but that small town that will wrap its arms around you and take you forward." ■