

THE GAZETTE

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EXPLORE IOWA FALLS

Small town blends nature, history, community pride

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For The Gazette

Friends who know we explore small Iowa towns enthused about a north-central town where they had lived. It boasted a swinging bridge, Flour Shop Bakery, well-planned museums and scenery reminiscent of the Northeast where we grew up. On the summer solstice, we decided to tease out the stories of Rocksylvania, Iowa, now known as Iowa Falls.

From Cedar Rapids, our car sliced north and west through Iowa's expansive corn and soybean fields. Open country with distant horizons ended abruptly as we entered the town on the Iowa River gorge.

Big, verdant trees greeted us. Seeing mature healthy oaks, basswoods and elms was in pleasant contrast to Cedar Rapids' derecho-shattered trees. Within minutes of arriving, we learned the story of why the town was originally called Rocksylvania.

After checking into the



River Retreat Airbnb, we joined a dozen other visitors from distant places and boarded the Scenic City Empress Riverboat. As light rain pattered down, we motored quietly up and down the Iowa River between limestone bluffs topped by green-clad trees. The boat pierced the heart of Rocksylvania as our tour guides shared stories.

SCENIC CITY EMPRESS

"Early settlers called their new town Rocksylvania after its two distinctive features: rocky bluffs and forests. Because some residents struggled spelling and pronouncing that name, it was changed to Iowa Falls," said Jessica Tjarks, executive director of the Scenic City Empress Boat Club nonprofit.

That change caused a kerfuffle. She and the boat's captain narrated other stories of the arch bridges that connect parts of the town, elegant homes perched on the bluffs and a towering Peter Toth wooden sculpture looming above the river.

A century ago, a dam was constructed downstream, flooding the falls that gave the town its new name. The resulting small reservoir spawned lake-type outdoor recreation upstream.

"There is no other boat ride like the Empress anywhere in north-central Iowa," Hardin County Board educator Davis Horton said.

The boat hosts special rides, including elegant meals and owl prowls. On certain evenings, the boat anchors midriver as Horton lures owls from riverbank trees.

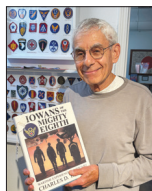
"Sometimes they fly within a few feet of people," he said.

During our two-day visit, residents shared stories of the wood sculptures dotting town and plentiful parks and museums. The denizens of summer evenings — the fireflies — dancing in the air delighted us.



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A serene Iowa River flows past limestone bluffs and under the Oak Street Bridge in Iowa Falls. When the original bridge needed to be replaced, the Iowa Department of Transportation kept the arch bridge theme tying to the other arch bridges that cross the Iowa River.



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Dave Gervich, president of the Iowa Falls Historical Society, holds a copy of "Iowans of the Mighty Eight." The lives of Iowans who served in the over 100 U.S. military conflicts are featured in the Heartland Military Museum in Iowa Falls. Gen. Randy Alan George, former chief of staff of the Army, is one of the most recent.

Iowa Falls is home to about 5,100 people who call it the Scenic City. That's appropriate based on views of water, trees and rocks. It's an island of rolling terrain surrounded by level farmland.

"Although it's geologically different, the terrain reminds people of the Driftless Area," Horton said.

Iowa Falls also is called the Bridge City because the town clings to a river that meanders back and forth. Auto, train and foot bridges stitch different parts of the town together. The main bridges sport distinctive arches built by the local Welden family.

BIG OPPORTUNITIES

For a small town, Iowa Falls offers visitors plenty to do. Our time was busy and serendipitous. In addition to riding the Empress, we took in an open breed horse show sponsored by the Iowa Arabian Association at the Ellsworth Equestrian Center, dined in local restaurants and explored most parts of town by car.

We've made similar tours of Iowa small towns and immediately noticed a pleasant difference in Iowa Falls. Too many towns have fallen on hard times. Plywood covers windows of



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The Calkins Nature Area in Hardin County, connected to Silos and Smokestacks, is one of many national heritage areas in Iowa.

closed storefronts. Businesses and houses stand in obvious decline. Not Iowa Falls. We were amazed to discover grand houses carefully maintained and a downtown filled with open and prosperous locally owned businesses.

Diana Theis, executive director of the Iowa Falls Chamber of Commerce, shared the following story. Back in the late 1980s, 14 storefronts were empty. A group of women thought, "Somebody needs to do something. It's us!" They worked with Main Street Iowa, made connections, encouraged businesses to spiff up the storefronts and shared successes.

"(Today), it seems that when one store closes, a new one moves in," she said proudly.

MUSEUMS GALORE

Dave Gervich, president of the Iowa Falls Historical Society, met us at the Heartland Military Museum downtown. One of five area museums, it shares stories of local people caught up in conflicts dating to the War of 1812.

"The key to creating small, interesting museums is collecting and sharing the stories and artifacts of residents," he said.

An example is the life journey of Joseph Gomer. Born nearby in 1920, he reached the rank of major and piloted fighter planes as a Tuskegee Airman. Later, during a career with

the U.S. Forest Service, he received meritorious recognition for his work creating opportunities for minorities.

Other museums include the Sue Crotty Museum, the Victorian-era Dow House featuring photographs of ordinary people and life in early Iowa Falls, the restored Illinois Central Depot, and the Mills Tower railroad control tower, a forerunner of an airport control tower.

PLAYGROUND MARATHONS

Iowa Falls has more interesting and well-tended parks than we expected. Most have amazing playgrounds.

"When my grandchildren visit, we make a playground marathon ending at the enormous castle playground at Pineview School," Theis said.

"There are at least 65 public parks in the county. About 80% of them are on or near the river, which is part of the Iowa River Greenbelt," Horton said. "Around Iowa Falls, the rocks are mostly limestone, but downstream, it changes to sandstone."

We met him at the Calkins Nature Area a few miles west of town. The land had been donated to Ellsworth Community College by the Calkins family and is managed by the Hardin County Conservation Board. Just outside the building, a prairie bloomed in

If You Go

For more information or to plan your trip to Hardin County, visit the following websites:

- **Calkins Nature Area:** hardincountyia.gov/calkins-nature-area
- **Iowa Falls Chamber of Commerce:** iowa-fallschamber.com
- **Eldora Chamber of Commerce:** eldora-chamber.org
- **Iowa Falls Historical Society:** iowafallshistoricalsociety.com
- **Scenic City Empress Riverboat:** empress-boatclub.org

to see them," Horton said.

POW CAMPS

More stories awaited us down the Iowa River corridor in Eldora, the Hardin County seat. Emma Chase and Gabby Mitchell, both young professionals, emphasized that the area is connected to the past and is "future forward."

The historic downtown buildings and purportedly the oldest continuous operating hardware store in New Providence take history buffs back in time. A gem is the CCC-POW museum on the Eldora County Fairgrounds. The Upper Midwest housed Italian and German prisoners of war during World War II. Volunteers Judy Jeske and Karla Ridpath explained that prisoners were "treated well," helped on local farms, and some chose to stay in America after the war.

Chase and Mitchell noted that connections between generations bring people home. They said summer is a good time to come, noting that the river defines activities. Pine Lake State Park boasts two lakes with modern campgrounds. Camp retreat centers have comfortable cabins and hotel-style facilities and sponsor concerts. People take The Rock and Row bus upstream then tube back down.

Before our trip, we knew little about Hardin County. But from our first adventure to our last with people sharing fascinating stories, we knew we would return to Hardin County and Iowa Falls.

Researchers and general visitors come from all over

summer glory. Perhaps the center's biggest attraction is a comprehensive display interpreting the geologic, climatic and human history of a land on the edge.

Hardin County sits on the east edge of the Des Moines Lobe, a once vast glacial ice sheet that flattened much of north-central Iowa. About 10,000 years ago, giant sloths, mastodons and mammoths roamed the ice's edge and were a food source for the Paleo-Indians who lived there.

The crown display is Native American artifacts spanning the time from the glaciers to settlement. Visitors learn the story of how wildlife changed and the evolution of tools made of stone and bone.

"It is one of the best collections anywhere, and nearly all artifacts were found in this area. Researchers and general visitors come from all over

WOOSLEY TOURS	
Sun. Aug 16	Theater, Mt. Carroll, IL. Hands on a Hardbody Comedy. Texans trying to win a new truck. Few Open Seats.
Sun. Aug 23	Theater...Love...or Best Offer Mattinee. Dinner, Dubuque, IA. Book by July 23.
Aug 27-28	Iowa Mississippi River Cruise, LeChaire to Dubuque, IA. Lodging, meals, National Mississippi Museum. Few Open Seats.
Oct 1-11	Red Rocks & Rails. 4 trains, National Parks in Colorado, Utah and Arizona, 4 Corners, more. Few Open Seats.
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