



The Wonders of Our Town

What makes Bloomington so special?

I've wrestled with this question ever since I arrived in town a little more than one year ago. When I talk or write (okay, e-mail) to friends in other places, or when they visit, I try to explain what is extraordinary about Bloomington.

The difficulty is that the answer is not something you can touch or point to—it's not the buildings or the neighborhoods, it's not the university. You can't drive visitors around town, show off the sights and expect them to "get it."

So what is "it?" Why do people love this place so much? Here are some of the answers for me.

For starters, I have become an absolute WFHB junkie. While stations I have listened to in other places try hard to involve their listeners—to make it seem that they are communicating directly to each one—their claims ring hollow. But that's not so with WFHB. There's no hard-sell on this station. There are no nauseating, repetitious testimonials. No hoopla, no pandering. The hosts and the programmers just gently lay out their offerings—a mix of talk and music as eclectic and encompassing as Bloomington itself. To my mind, WFHB is Bloomington's diorama. It establishes our sense of place.

The Lotus Festival. I had heard all about it, of course, but it still surpassed my expectations. The music was varied and wonderful, but I had expected that it would be varied and wonderful. What surprised me was the atmosphere. Moving from one venue to another or bundled up at an outdoor stage, I was greeted by friends and neighbors; I was surrounded by people of all ages—all types—and everybody was involved, sharing the music and the moment. It was like summer camp, a '60s love-in, a roaring campfire. It was the spirit of Bloomington exploding in fireworks.

The Cardinal Stage Company. I saw their first production, *Our Town*, at the Buskirk-Chumley not long after I arrived in Bloomington. The quality of the work was impressive. I didn't know who these people were or where they came from, but I witnessed the actors and director receive a prolonged, heartfelt standing ovation. It was later that I learned these were new kids in town, bent on establishing a professional theater company that would take plays to New York and around the country. Pretty ambitious. In October, I attended the Cardinal's production of Czech playwright Václav Havel's *Unveiling* in a small theater at the Waldron Center. It was equally professional and compelling. And the discussion of the play that followed, for which 90 percent of the audience stayed, demonstrated to me once again how people here are willing to embrace the new and be engaged.

The Stone Age Institute. Bloomington's riches never cease to amaze me. North of town, somewhere in the wilds (okay, I got lost trying to find it) is this startling, dynamic structure—a melding of modern and ancient—designed by the local architectural firm Kirkwood Design Studio. What's inside is truly amazing: human remains dating back 1.7 million years, the earliest stone tools used by our ancestors, a world-class archeological library. The Institute is independent, not-for-profit, and world-renowned. Its purpose is to advance research and education in human origins studies. Currently it has research projects underway in Ethiopia, Algeria, South Africa, and India.

I could go on and on (and in subsequent columns, I probably will) about what makes Bloomington Bloomington. But enough for now. I hope you enjoy this issue and that it captures some of what's special about our town.

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editor and publisher