Transcendental Development:
A Meditation on the Socioeconomic History of Fairfield, Iowa

by
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Introduction

In August of 1999, urban theorist Joel Kotkin published an article in *Forbes* magazine asking the question, "What changed Fairfield from a hick town to what some locals call "Silicorn Valley"?[1] On the surface, Kotkin's question is a call for investigation into the economic development of Fairfield, Iowa, a rural community in the southeastern corner of the state. He invokes the eccentric nickname that, for the last four decades, has captured the strong presence of entrepreneurial activity there in the cornfields, two thousand miles away from the Bay Area. He alludes to the fact that Fairfield has prospered in a modern economy that has shifted ideas and capital to the coasts, slowly depleting the Midwest of people and industry. Fairfield, however, has avoided this fate, and Kotkin was not the first to notice. A host of magazines and newspapers have made the same observation, and supplied the same ready-made story.

The problem is that Kotkin's question assumes far too much about Fairfield and its history. It presents Fairfield's modern condition as a consequence of something that happened *to* it. The author takes for granted that "Silicorn Valley" is the result of a change agent exerted upon the city, and that Fairfield is intrinsically different as a result. No longer is it a "hick town," Kotkin asserts; rather, Fairfield has been provided an identity associated with the more inventive connotations of Silicon Valley. A deeper dive into Fairfield's past reveals that this community's rural nature has never been a hindrance to local innovation. In fact, the city has hosted innovation and enterprise for well over one hundred years; in contrast to what Kotkin and others may imagine, "innovation" was not spontaneously introduced to the community from the outside.

[1] Joel Kotkin, "Resurgence of the Rural Life," *Forbes,* August 23, 1999, https://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/0823/139_print.html.

This is not to say that Fairfield has not been a modern success story. In the last forty-five years, Fairfield has thrived when many of its regional neighbors have not. Of the fifteen rural counties that comprise the region, four of them have seen population growth in the past decade; only one has seen growth over three percent.[2] The outlier, Jefferson County, has witnessed its population increase by nearly ten percent – outpacing Cedar Rapids' Linn County and rivaling Des Moines' Polk County in that same period of time, despite the fact that Jefferson is not home to a city of comparable size.

What accounts for Jefferson County's deviation is its county seat, the city of Fairfield. Fairfield's story began like many other Midwestern communities when white settlers travelling west across the American frontier arrived there in 1836 and founded the town. By 1842, Fairfield experienced a preview of its longstanding good fortune when it was nominated as one of the two Iowa Territory land offices.[3] This designation made the city an important nexus for regional expansion, as ambitious settlers flocked to Fairfield to purchase land across Iowa Territory. The first Iowa State Fair brought moderate media attention to the community, even more so the second year when it returned to Fairfield with larger crowds and attractions.[4] Enduring from the turn of the 20th century – and through America's manufacturing decline of the 1960s – was a thriving industrial sector that earned Fairfield an international reputation for its exported goods. All the while, the city was home to Parsons College, which since its founding in 1875 had been embraced by locals as a key cultural and economic engine.

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[2] Kevin Hardy and Yuejun Chen, "Population Change in Iowa from 2010-2017," *Des Moines Register*, May 29, 2018, https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2018/05/29/map-shows-stark-reality-iowa-rural-population-loss-depopulation-metro-urban/652175002/.

[3] Charles J. Fulton, *History of Jefferson County, Iowa: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement* (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), 171-180.

[4] "Iowa State Fair," *Fairfield Ledger*, October 11, 1855, www.NewspaperArchive.com.

In 1973, Fairfield began a transition in both economic and cultural terms. In June of that year, Parsons was forced to shut down after a series of financial and administrative miscalculations led to its disaccreditation. Many Fairfielders mourned Parsons as a local, community-oriented, Christian institution that embodied what Fairfield really was. In their minds, Parsons was also the economic heart of the community, and the loss of the college seemed to pose an existential threat to the city. Yet in a turn of events unfathomable to most in Fairfield, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder and guru of the New Age, Transcendental Meditation movement (TM), relocated his TM-based, namesake university Maharishi International University (MIU) to the former Parsons campus in the following May.

MIU and the meditating community grew throughout the 1970s, and at a gathering in 1979, Maharishi called on thousands more followers to move to Fairfield in order to collectively practice the meditation technique. The city became the center of the global TM movement, and as the surrounding counties hemorrhaged people in the last four decades of the 20th century, Jefferson expanded as followers descended on the county seat. These newcomers filled the physical vacancy left by Parsons College, and founded ethnic restaurants, art studios and, most famously, tech startups to sustain themselves in a primarily blue-collar economy. Several of these enterprises succeeded and scaled upward, and soon enough, Fairfield became known locally and internationally as "Silicorn Valley" for its abundance of startups in the cornfields.

When MIU released its first statement to the Fairfield community, its spokesman promised to bring investment and re-establish the missing town-gown relationship. While locals heralded the news of a college as a welcome replacement for Parsons, the good feelings did not last. As Fairfielders began to learn more about that TM and its Hindu roots, many objected to the meditators on grounds that TM was both a cosmopolitan threat to local, traditional mores and a

religious threat to their Christian community. Sparked by these religious fears, an opposition movement arose over the course of the 1970s that vilified TM and its "roos" (pejorative shorthand for "gurus") in local newspapers and town meetings. Townspeople and clergymen alike claimed that TM and the meditators were incompatible with the true essence of Fairfield. Simply put, the local, self-proclaimed "townie" opposition insisted that Fairfield was a Christian community based on local values, whose people were community-oriented to the core. They positioned themselves in contrast to TM and its meditators, whom they deemed a Hindu cult that was insular, foreign, and a threat to community norms. In light of this reaction, meditators developed a narrative that they saved the town by replacing Parsons and built an entrepreneurial culture in Fairfield.

A closer look suggests that none of these narratives match up with the town's true history. Fairfield's industrial base had always been the main economic generator, and the local economy showed no signs of slowing down when Parsons closed. In addition, Fairfield had a long-running trend of what a modern vocabulary would call "entrepreneurship," and economic development for generations before MIU arrived, which created its strong, industrial base. These facts dispute both the meditator and non-meditator narratives. First, an analysis of Fairfield's historic entrepreneurship and industrial resilience will show that MIU neither saved the town nor established an entrepreneurial culture. Further analysis will attest to the fact that Fairfield had a long history of national and international economic linkages to the larger world – connections that helped propel its innovation and entrepreneurship in the first place – thus contradicting the townie claim that Fairfield was inherently traditional and insular.

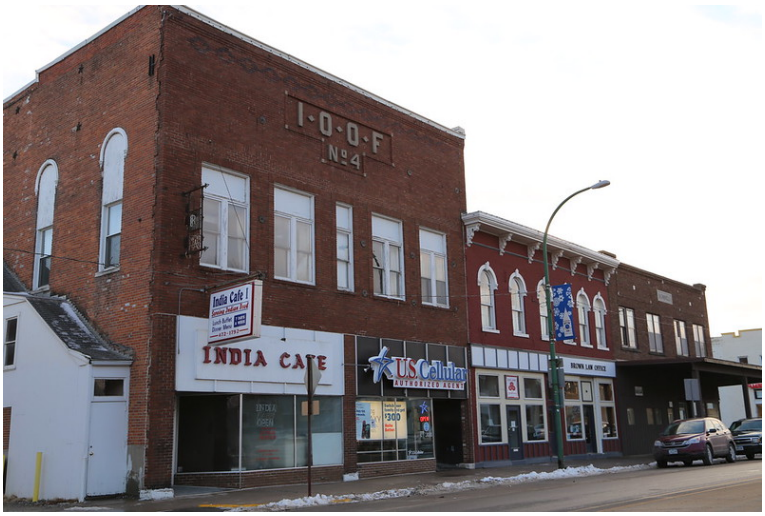
What I hope to show in this essay is that MIU did not fundamentally "change" Fairfield. It neither saved a town on the brink of collapse, nor did it introduce a culture of

entrepreneurship. What seemed to be driving the conflict was how each side imagined themselves in relation to the other, and to the more abstract conceptions of what Fairfield was as a rural, Midwestern community. I argue that both sides occluded Fairfield's true history through their respective narratives, and that this was an ongoing process from the time that Parsons College shut its doors. What eventually emerged was a "meditator-as-savior" narrative, or precisely what Joel Kotkin re-produced when he asked, "What changed Fairfield from a hick town to what some locals call 'Silicorn Valley?'" As part of its analysis, the paper suggests one way to understand this inconsistency is by engaging what historian Kristin Hoganson identifies as the "Heartland Myth," a deep-seated belief that the Midwest is an inherently insular region of the United States.

Fairfield from the early-1970s onward is at once a story about occluded history and the clash of identity in the rural Midwest. What really happened when a group of coastal, neo-Hindu eccentrics migrated to a rural, Midwestern community and added two large golden domes to its topography?[5] Why did native Fairfielders react to the meditators in the ways that they did? How did the meditators frame their arrival and relationship with Fairfield henceforth? What roles do myths and realities about local history play in the story of Fairfield? The goal of this paper is to show readers not only how Fairfield became known in the media as a "hick town" redeemed by a group of enlightened outsiders, but also how sight of its true history has been lost in the glint of the golden domes.

[5] "Maharishi International University," *Fairfield, Iowa - Tune into Our Vibe!* Fairfield Convention & Visitors Bureau (accessed: September 17, 2019), www.travelfairfield.com/business/maharishi-international-university.

Part One: Setting the Stage



Downtown Fairfield, Iowa, 2013.
Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/tourismguy/8462679410/in/photostream/

Visit the city of Fairfield, Iowa's Convention and Visitors Bureau website and you find an active and eclectic small town. A slideshow cycles between images of an art gallery, various outdoor music performances, and tables full of smiling people chatting over coffee. A digital calendar lists upcoming events, including a "Forever Motown" show, an indoor farmer's market, and the "Fairfield Diwali Celebration." In a playful demonstration of self-awareness, one blurb invites the reader to "tune in to our vibe," implying that visitors should prepare for something unusual. The website even uses the word "unique" fourteen times alone.[6] But embellishment is the cornerstone of any effective marketing strategy, and there are approximately 19,494 other towns and cities nationwide.[7] Is Fairfield truly unique?

Given Fairfield's geographic location, the American Midwest is a useful context in which to evaluate the community. Small, Midwestern towns like Fairfield have long been understood as

[6] "Events." *Fairfield, Iowa - Tune into Our Vibe!*, Fairfield Convention & Visitors Bureau, (accessed: September 17, 2019), www.travelfairfield.com/.
[7] ACS FactFinder (accessed: September 2019).

shaped by the larger culture of middle America, and the idea of the "Heartland." To Kristin Hoganson, the Heartland is a place characterized by myth, particularly the notion that the region is a "garden of prelapsarian innocence before the fall into global entanglements."[8] Hoganson paints a picture of how quintessential Midwestern towns appear in popular imagination among Americans, including among Midwesterners themselves. She conjures images of a collection of self-sufficient homesteads comprising insulated communities where everybody knows everybody, undisturbed by the "entanglements" caused by path-breaking ideas, complicated systems of trade, or people who break the local mold. In other words, the myth is that the Heartland has avoided these "entangling" ideas and systems, and as a result, has been left culturally, politically, and economically stunted. While Hoganson refutes this myth by describing the various linkages that tie the Midwest to the rest of the world, she also explains that Americans give credence to the myth for a variety of reasons, ranging from the benign to the malicious. For some, there is value in embracing one's immediate surroundings and localness as the globe becomes increasingly homogenized; for others, the myth serves to validate and perpetuate xenophobia or ethno-nationalism.

The fact that the "Heartland Myth" is just that, a myth, is nowhere more evident than in the economic history of the region it purports to capture. By the early 20th century, the Midwest had become a place of immense productivity and national sustenance. Its abundance of fertile land, natural resources, and growing labor pool "catapulted" its industry to the "first rank of worldwide competitiveness."[9] Countless factories produced key consumer goods like automobiles and automobile parts, an industry that became the "lynchpin of the heartland

[8] Kristin L. Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), xiv.
[9] William M. Bowen, *The Road through the Rust Belt: From Preeminence to Decline to Prosperity* (Kalamazoo: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2014), 9.

economy" before mid-century.[10] The Midwest was also known for its enormous output of steel dating back to the early 1900s; by 1968, just four steel hubs around the Great Lakes produced a total of 51 million tons, a total "exceeded by only two steel-making nations, the USSR and Japan."[11] The Midwest no longer represented the frontier of civilization per se, but its steel, automobiles and other exports helped to develop other frontiers around the world.

But the industrial foundation of the 20th century Midwestern economy soon proved vulnerable. Since the latter half of the century, the "Heartland's" competitiveness has been challenged by a shifting international economic framework. William Bowen writes that the period between the 1950s and 1970s brought an "enormous overall increase" in global trade, and the rise of foreign production capacity, much of it in Asia and Latin America, chipped away at the lead held by Midwestern industry.[12] The loss of manufacturing jobs has prompted a corresponding decline in population share, employment, and other demographic metrics that gauge regional vitality. One study determined that the Midwest ceded nearly a 7 percent share of the total American population from 1950 to 2000, while other data revealed that per capita income of southern states Georgia and North Carolina grew to eclipse those of Midwestern states Illinois and Ohio respectively, in roughly the same time span.[13] 20th century macroeconomic trends have made and broken entire regions of the United States, and the Midwest was not spared a difficult fate.

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[10] Jon Christian Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 103.
[11] Kenneth Warren, *The American Steel Industry, 1850-1970: A Geographical Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 301.
[12] Bowen, *Road through the Rust Belt*, 11.
[13] ACS FactFinder (accessed: October 2019); Aaron M. Renn, "The Decline of the Midwest, the Rise of the South," *New Geography*, October 21, 2014, www.newgeography.com/content/004579-the-decline-midwest-rise-south.

It is specifically the rural areas like Fairfield that are perhaps the most representative of Midwestern decline. Towering above the Illinois cornfields are the skyscrapers of Chicago, an undeniably Midwestern city with an international presence. Edward Luce paraphrases urban theorist Richard Florida by saying that Chicago no longer works symbiotically with its rural neighbors. Now it takes the "best and brightest from the small towns of America and plugs them into the global economy."[14] Luce portrays the metropolis as a magnet to the economically-sterile countryside, enticing its residents away with higher wages. This urbanization is part of a broader phenomenon. In the postmodern moment, Aihwa Ong writes, the city is viewed "not as an exclusive site of capitalism… but as a milieu that is in constant formation, drawing on disparate connections, and subject to the play of national and global forces."[15] While Chicago once served as a regional hub where primarily Midwestern goods and money flowed in and out, the global economy has eroded this relationship. Over time, the sheer pace of technology and digital infrastructure has arguably created an opposing feedback loop for the city and the rural; global networks already running through Chicago became more deeply entrenched and exclusively urban.

As a result, places that have been excluded from the urban network – places that resemble Fairfield, Iowa, a small town located sixty miles from the nearest interstate highway – have been suffering from the mid-20th century onward. Hoganson writes that the rural communities imagined in the "Heartland Myth" have declined as a result of this trend to the global and the urban. They have become smaller as the city poaches their residents, poorer as capital concentrates in distant centers, and "comparatively off the beaten track" as long-haul flights join

[14] Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Grove Press, 2017), 48.
[15] Anindya Roy and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 3, https://escholarship.org/content/qt0zq6h5vr/qt0zq6h5vr.pdf.

the pre-existing hubs.[16] These processes have damaged "Heartland" communities and those who live in them in quantifiable ways. Reflecting on life in Middletown, Ohio in 2016, J.D. Vance emphasizes that the statistics reveal a grim future for young people in peripheral areas: "If they're lucky, they'll manage to avoid welfare; and if they're unlucky, they'll die of a heroin overdose, as happened to dozens in my small hometown just last year."[17] Indeed, the feedback loops of urbanization and globalization have generated tangible harm at the local level in outlying communities.

Nonetheless, a brief driving tour of Fairfield indicates that the city has managed to avoid this path to decline. Turning off U.S. Route 34 onto East Burlington Avenue, the standard Midwestern visuals impart no clue of what lies ahead: Copper-tinted cornfields abut the blacktop while a row of silver grain elevators looms to the right. About two miles in, however, the scenery opens up into a charming downtown teeming with life. A steady flow of street traffic encircles a lush, main green with a freshly-painted gazebo and people lounging about. Perhaps the most notable visual cue is the wide perimeter of tidy storefronts that encloses Central Park. Strikingly, not one of them appears to be empty, and several restaurant patrons enjoy sidewalk seating in the fashion of a Parisian cafe.

While it is certainly true that declining cities may have lots of street activity while prosperous ones may not have any at all, the significance of Fairfield's downtown optics should not be understated. Two urban researchers believe that "the viability of a small town's Main Street gives a good indication of the overall health of a community."[18] Embedded in this observation is the idea that a community's abstract well-being can be diagnosed using the

[16] Hoganson, *The Heartland,* xxii.
[17] J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 2.
[18] Pavy and Wagner, "Focusing the Old Downtown on Specialty Retail for Economic Survivals: The Transition of Ponchatoula, Louisiana," *Small Town,* 24, no. 3 (Nov.–Dec. 1993): 18, *Main Street Revisited.*

physical well-being of downtown. Moreover, the "viability" of a place also denotes continued success, and downtown Fairfield has witnessed near non-existent commercial vacancy since the 1980s. In a late September newspaper in 1987, Executive Secretary Mike Brouwer of the Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce noted "no empty storefronts around the square."[19] In this sense, Pavy and Wagner would argue that Fairfield's active and enduring core points to the broader robustness of the city.

While visual evidence is important, the city of Fairfield can boast statistics to demonstrate prosperity beyond the vibrant façade. In fact, in August of 2018 the Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce counted twenty-three retail stores and twenty-four restaurants in the downtown alone.[20] To put the latter figure into perspective, the geographically-closest community of proximate size to Fairfield, Mount Pleasant, has fourteen restaurants city-wide.[21] Moreover, the abundance of active retail space around downtown is a fair representation of the broader, local economy: Fairfield's unemployment rate was approximately 7 percent at the 2010 census, relatively low considering nearby Ottumwa and Mount Pleasant registered rates of nearly 10 percent at the census.[22] The abundance of business in Fairfield – ranging from restaurants, retail, and other establishments – drives the municipal unemployment rate down below those of its neighbors.

Compared to its broader region, Fairfield and its business activity remain remarkable. One useful metric is the ratio of residents to businesses, demonstrating that Fairfield has a comparatively high rate of business activity compared to its regional neighbors. Compared in

[19] "Addresses Republican Women," *Fairfield Ledger,* September 29, 1987.
[20] "Business Directory," Fairfield Area Chamber of Commerce (accessed: October 2019), https://www.fairfieldiowa.com/business-directory.html.
[21] "Main Street Business Directory." Mount Pleasant Area Chamber of Commerce (accessed: October 2019), https://mountpleasantiowa.org/main-street-business-directory.
[22] ACS FactFinder (accessed: October 2019).

Table 1 are the fifteen counties that comprise the Southeastern Iowa region, their largest cities, and the number of businesses that were registered in the municipality as of October 2019. With a population of about ten-thousand people, Fairfield runs middle of the pack; however, this sum divided by the city's 584 businesses reveals that there are 18 residents per business. The two cities immediately more and less populous than Fairfield – Fort Madison and Mount Pleasant – tally 65 and 51 residents per business, respectively. At the same time, the average number of residents per business across all fifteen cities in the Southeastern Iowa region is 52. Not only does Fairfield have a greater number of businesses than similar-sized cities, it also has triple the number of average businesses per resident across Southeastern Iowa.

County	Largest City	City Population	Businesses	Residents/Business
Des Moines	Burlington	24,838	359	69
Wapello	Ottumwa	24,550	218	113
Mahaska	Oskaloosa	11,426	263	43
Lee	Fort Madison	10,468	160	65
Jefferson	Fairfield	10,414	584	18
Henry	Mount Pleasant	8,737	170	51
Washington	Washington	7,309	213	34
Appanoose	Centerville	5,478	78	70
Lucas	Chariton	4,172	65	64
Monroe	Albia	3,731	60	62
Davis	Bloomfield	2,694	79	34
Louisa	Wapello	2,026	51	40
Keokuk	Sigourney	2,015	56	36
Wayne	Corydon	1,587	31	51
Van Buren	Keosauqua	906	27	34

Table 1: Residents per Business, Southeastern Iowa Region as of October 2019 (source: "Active Iowa Business Entities," data.iowa.gov; ACS FactFinder)

Expanding beyond even the Southeastern region, Fairfield may be evaluated alongside similarly-sized cities across the state of Iowa. Table 2 includes the three immediately more and less populous cities in the state, their businesses, and each city's resident-to-business ratio. Again, the data reflects that none of the communities come close to Fairfield in terms of local business presence. To provide some perspective on how these smaller cities fare when viewed through this particular metric, the chart also includes the three most populous Iowa cities. Des Moines, Iowa's most populous city and self-professed commercial "hub" for the state of Iowa,

has four times more residents per business than Fairfield.[23] While this is not to say that Iowa's largest city is not its economic powerhouse, this figure illustrates the relative economic capacity of a rural city twenty times smaller. Finally, the city of Cedar Falls rounds out the table: with a population of 41,048, Cedar Falls is home to 560 registered businesses. This profile is included because Cedar Falls is the only city with approximately the same number of businesses at 584, yet it took nearly four times the number of people to come close to an equivalent level of business presence.

County	City	City Population	Businesses	Residents/Business
Clay	Spencer	11,031	268	41
Lee	Fort Madison	10,468	125	84
Buena Vista	Storm Lake	10,458	199	53
Jefferson	Fairfield	10,414	584	18
Marion	Pella	10,335	350	30
Lee	Keokuk	10,274	173	59
Bremer	Waverly	10,153	175	58
Polk	Des Moines	216,853	2753	79
Linn	Cedar Rapids	133,174	1879	71
Scott	Davenport	102,085	1269	80
Black Hawk	Cedar Falls	41,048	560	73

Table 2: Residents per Business, similarly-sized Iowa cities as of October 2019 (source: "Active Iowa Business Entities," www.data.iowa.gov; ACS FactFinder)

While the "residents per business" metric is useful for assessing whether commercial appearances match commercial reality, there are other metrics that indicate vitality in and around Fairfield. One of the most dependable measurements of a community's overall condition is its population trend. After all, this figure conveys the rate at which people are joining the community, staying, and starting families, or if more are leaving for other places. Several key factors that influence the movement of people inward and outward are implied in this statistic, such as employment opportunities, quality of education, and local amenities. Simply put, this

[23] "Key Industries." Greater Des Moines Partnership, (accessed: November 22, 2019), https://www.dsmpartnership.com/growing-business-here/key-industries.

data point reveals whether the community is attracting and retaining residents, which has implications for the economic and cultural status of the community at large.

For the purposes of population analysis, Jefferson County will be used to represent Fairfield.[24] According to Table 3, of the fifteen counties that make up Southeastern Iowa, Jefferson ranked seventh in total population in both 1980 and 2017. While this may seem like stagnation, Fairfield has in fact witnessed the highest growth rate in that span of time. At 13 percent growth, Jefferson County was one of only three in the region that saw any gain, and one of only two counties with a double figure gain. In terms of all the population changes that occurred in the Southeast region, the average change was a loss of ten percent of the county population. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the two other counties with populations on the upswing are both adjacent to Jefferson County, which may suggest that Fairfield's growth has extended benefits to some of its surrounding communities. What is for certain is that this data captures Jefferson County's long-term growth in a region that has alternatively experienced long-term decline.

County	1980 population	2017 population	Percent change
Jefferson	16,316	18,422	13%
Washington	20,141	22,281	11%
Henry	18,890	19,863	5%
Davis	9,104	8,966	-2%
Mahaska	22,867	22,235	-3%
Louisa	12,055	11,184	-7%
Wapello	40,241	35,044	-13%
Des Moines	46,203	39,417	-15%
Monroe	9,209	7,845	-15%
Van Buren	8,626	7,157	-17%
Lucas	10,313	8,534	-17%
Appanoose	15,511	12,352	-20%
Lee	43,106	34,295	-20%
Wayne	8,199	6,476	-21%
Keokuk	12,921	10,153	-21%

Table 3: Population by Southeastern Iowa county, 1980-2017 (source: U.S. Census Bureau)

[24] The county metric is chosen here over the municipality metric for two reasons. First, data going back further than the 2000 census is more readily accessible for counties than for county subdivisions. Second, most rural counties have a main nucleus – typically the county seat – around which a collection of smaller towns coalesces economically, socially and politically. Given this structure, the condition of the nucleus is essentially reflected in the condition of the county, and population trends are no exception (see Fuguitt, 1965).

Beyond the Southeastern region, Jefferson County has also outpaced the growth rate of counties with comparable populations. The three counties immediately bigger and smaller than Jefferson are included in Table 4, again paired with their change in population from 1980 to 2017. The data shows that Jefferson is one of only two counties with positive growth in this 37-year span. Following Jefferson with ten percent growth is the tourism-heavy Dickinson County in the northern Iowa Great Lakes region, whose premier assets are its natural amenities that make tourism and vacation home ownership a perpetual driver of the local economy.[25] Taking Jefferson out of the equation, these statistics may indicate that scenery has saved Dickinson from the fate of Iowa decline. Jefferson County's 99.7% Southern Iowa drift plain geography is much more conducive to agriculture than water-skiing, much like the rest of the counties in Tables 3 and 4.[26] What this demonstrates is that Jefferson is not just an outlier in a particular region of Iowa. It is an outlier among counties that bear the closest resemblance to it demographically, and has even outpaced the county that is an outlier for its natural characteristics.

County	1980 population	2017 population	Percent change
Jefferson	16,316	18,422	13.00%
Dickinson	15,629	17,199	10.00%
Cedar	18,635	18,543	-0.50%
Poweshiek	19,306	18,314	-5.10%
Crawford	18,935	17,056	-10.00%
Jackson	22,503	19,366	-13.90%
Clayton	21,098	17,637	-16.40%

Table 4: Population by similarly-sized, Iowa county, 1980-2017 (source: U.S. Census Bureau)

Indeed, there is life in the city of Fairfield, in both residential and commercial terms. In fact, the characteristics of these residents and businesses are distinctive in their own right. Take for example the downtown Revelations Cafe, where two long-haired, older men sip espresso and

[25] Iowa Economic Development Authority, "The Economic Impact of Travel on Iowa Counties 2017," Iowa Tourism Office, September 2018, https://www.traveliowa.com/UserDocs/pages/IA2017Report_9282018.pdf.
[26] ACS FactFinder (accessed: November 2019).

reference Hindu philosophy against a wall filled with books. There is also Gupta's Vegetarian Indian Cuisine, another downtown spot where a Sari-draped woman serves homemade lentils cafeteria-style; her husband discusses the St. Louis Cardinals game with a customer a few feet away. On an outdoor patio, the inflections of a British accent cut through the chatter of a group, one of several incongruous sounds and sights in the rural Midwestern setting. Looking closely, one might notice that many homes around town appear to be modified in such a way that their entrances are on the side, with the original front door hidden with shrubbery. Outside of town, approaching the northern city limit on Highway 1, two enormous golden domes appear like a mirage beside the road. Fairfield is truly unique.

Part Two: The Revival of a College Town?

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Transcendental Meditation founder and guru, c. 2005.
Source: https://www.latimes.com/news/la-me-maharishi6feb06-story.html

To understand what is happening here, look no further than Transcendental Meditation. In 1954, a 36-year old student named Mahesh Prasad Varma decided to leave his Hindu monastery in the far north of India where he lived and studied. Upon his guru's death, Mahesh opted to pursue his own goal of spreading meditation for world peace, and in 1955 began to refine a meditation technique he had learned at the monastery. In a break from his monastery's tradition of limited and ceremonious pedagogical transmission, Mahesh began promoting what he would call "Transcendental Meditation" to the general public throughout India. Despite his distance from the Hindu institution, Mahesh steeped TM in much of the "holy tradition" that he had adopted from the monastery, such as pre-meditation rituals and greetings that reference the divine ("Jai Guru Dev," or "Hail to the Guru, who is God"). Nonetheless, Mahesh envisioned TM as a simple and accessible meditation technique that could be incorporated into both spiritual and secular lifestyles.[27]

[27] Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 80-106.

At the height of the Cold War in 1959, Mahesh – who had by then started referring to himself as "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" – introduced his new spiritual practice to the United States and the western world. The stout and charismatic "giggling guru" quickly attracted a following of several thousand by the end of the sixties, propelled by a growing segment of society that was interested in counter-cultural avenues of refuge from the anxieties of the Cold War nuclear stand-off. The movement arguably reached peak popularity when the Beatles adopted Maharishi as the band's personal guru in 1967.[28] Not only did TM offer a way to calm the nerves, but it also appealed to the Hippie generation who sought to achieve a higher state of consciousness. In this historical moment, Transcendental Meditation gained traction as a unique exercise for both mental health and spiritual enlightenment.

By 1970, Maharishi decided to give more structure to TM, both in brick-and-mortar form and by re-imagining TM as a more holistic lifestyle path. Maharishi began to promote TM as a cornerstone of his "Science of Creative Intelligence" philosophy, a slight shift from the counter-cultural associations of the 1960s to be palatable to an even wider audience. By doing so, the guru packaged his "Eastern teachings in another term that rational-minded Westerners could accept."[29] In concise terms, the "Science of Creative Intelligence" aimed to apply spiritual principles to the study of more earthly domains like science and nature to achieve a "complete fulfillment" of both mind and spirit.[30] To instill this philosophy in his followers, Maharishi founded Maharishi International University (MIU) in Goleta, California in 1973, offering traditional business, art and science curricula transmitted through the "Science of Creative

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[28] James Baugess and Abbe DeBolt, *Encyclopedia of the Sixties: A Decade of Culture and Counterculture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 656.
[29] Joseph Weber, *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 21.
[30] "Science of Creative Intelligence" (accessed: December 12, 2019), http://www.maharishi-mahesh-yogi.org/sci/sci.html.

Intelligence" framework. For reasons which will be elaborated upon later, the leadership team decided to relocate MIU from Goleta to Fairfield in 1974, which has been its permanent home ever since.

In order to illustrate the complex relationship that MIU would come to have with the city of Fairfield and its native residents, it is imperative to explain what was happening in the city in the years preceding Maharishi's arrival. For much of the century before, Fairfield had prided itself as a college town – the small, Presbyterian Parsons College had been a fixture in Fairfield's culture and economy since 1875. In 1955, New York City Minister Millard G. Roberts took the reins as college president, and deployed a series of non-traditional business and academic strategies to boost enrollment and funds. The plan managed to increase the student body by thousands and institutional income from below $200,000 in 1954-55 to nearly $4 million in 1962-63.[31] The rejuvenation of the college seemed to have ripple effects throughout the community, epitomized by the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce naming Roberts "Man of the Year" in 1958; two years later, he was given a Cadillac by a group of forty businesses who lauded his ability to bring deep-pocketed students and their spending money to town.[32]

By the end of the 1960s, the same unconventional culture that brought about Parsons' rise threatened to cause its downfall. In order to boost revenue, Roberts had recruited students who failed out of more established institutions across the country, giving the school a reputation as a last-resort for wealthy students. *Life* magazine published a fateful article in 1966 titled "The Wizard of Flunk-Out U.," which shined a negative spotlight on the school's corporate style and lackadaisical academic standards. The article criticized Roberts for leading a college that valued

[31] James Koerner, *The Parsons College Bubble: A Tale of Higher Education in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 9.
[32] Dean Gabbert, "Life and Death of a College," *Fairfield Ledger,* June 2, 1973.

profit over scholastic integrity, one which essentially picked up and churned out students on a conveyor belt that left them no better prepared on the other side of their education. Roberts was quoted saying that the college "may look like a factory. That's what it is."[33] Soon after this expose, the board of trustees voted to relieve Roberts of his duties, and within half a decade, Parsons had lost its accreditation amid piles of debt. On May 25th, 1973 after almost two decades of outward success, Parsons closed its doors for good: the modern Parsons machine proved to be smoke and mirrors. What was left in its wake was a vacant campus, as well as economic and cultural uncertainty.

To be sure, what made Parsons's closing such a watershed moment was the fact that many people believed that the vitality of Fairfield and its people were closely tied to the school. Fairfield resident and Parsons alumna Joyce Gabbert fondly recalled in a *Ledger* piece the values her undergraduate experience instilled in her:

> [Parsons] gave me a wealth of many things – a love of God, a reverence for books, a kaleidoscope of drama, an emotion for music, a warmth for people, a concern for truth and a quest for learning. [Parsons] gave me tremendous friendships during all 33 years.[34]

Gabbert described her deep and long-lasting ties to the school, and underscored its Christian and community-oriented nature: two themes that would eventually play significant roles in the town's response to MIU. Two years later, one *Fairfield Ledger* editorial recalled how many residents viewed the prominent role of Parsons: "This institution, which stimulated our expansion in population and economy, shocked us with its demise in 1973."[35] Stan Plum of Fairfield's Carnegie Historical Museum reflected on a common belief that the town would have

[33] John Frook, "The Wizard of Flunk-Out U," *Life* magazine, June 3, 1966.
[34] Joyce Gabbert, "Parsons College: A Grand Old Lady Died at 98," *Fairfield Ledger*, June 2, 1973.
[35] "Economic growth promoted by plan," *Fairfield Ledger*, March 15, 1975.

"dried up and blown away by 1980 had [MIU] not arrived."[36] The loss of Parsons seemed to be a devastating blow from which Fairfield and its economy might never recover. Evidently, the school's closure posed an existential threat in the minds of Fairfielders who were accustomed to its prominent, local role, both in cultural and economic terms.

It was during this upheaval that Maharishi and his advisors were charting a new course for the Maharishi International University. The school had spent two years in Goleta, but officials deemed Southern California an inappropriate location for the school's long-term development. According to several sources within the movement, there were both qualitative and quantitative explanations for why TM officials determined that Fairfield, Iowa was the best destination. "It is quiet, and has none of the distractions of the city so people can focus on their inner development," said Craig Pearson, an early member and current Vice President of MIU. [37] Another long-time figure within the MIU organization, entrepreneur Burt Chojnowski, cited more practical reasons why Fairfield was chosen:

> [The leadership team] looked at over two-hundred facilities around the country that were for sale. They originally bought two; one in Fairfield, and one in New Hampshire. Fairfield stuck out because the Parsons campus just closed down and was still fully stocked. There was space to expand, and possible room for one-thousand students.[38]

Chojnowski elaborates that both Fairfield's intrinsic isolation and Parsons' salvageable skeleton were appealing for a growing community of meditators.

MIU officials claimed that Fairfield would likewise derive immense benefit from their decision to invest there. MIU's pitch for the Parsons campus appealed to Fairfielders concerned

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[36] Stan Plum, "Interview with Stan Plum, Fairfield Carnegie Museum historian," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 27, 2019.
[37] Craig Pearson, "Interview with Craig Pearson, Vice President of Maharishi International University," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 29, 2019.
[38] Burt Chojnowski, "Interview with Burt Chojnowski, meditating consultant and public speaker," Phone interview by Adam Lipsey, Brown University, September 29, 2019.

about the future of their community. In an introductory message read to an early May 1974 town hall meeting, MIU's then-vice president of expansion Les Schmadeka wrote that the benefits of hosting MIU in Fairfield would be numerous and rekindle the town-gown economic relationship through building contracts and long-term local consumption. He argued that not only would each student spend an average of $1,000 per year on local goods and services, but that renovations would total about $1 million in labor and materials supplied from the Fairfield area.[39] Framed in this way, Maharishi International University pledged to inject much-desired capital into the local economy, re-establish the town-gown dynamic, and rescue a town ready to "blow away."

As a result, MIU succeeded in ingratiating itself with many Fairfielders in the days and weeks following this introduction. The figures presented by Schmadeka suggested that MIU may have been the replacement the town needed. Two weeks after Schmadeka's May 6th message, Fairfield resident Ronald Moore wrote to the *Fairfield Ledger* in support of the school and the financial boost it promised. "When Parsons College closed down last year," Moore reminded, "many people lost their jobs. Merchants and apartment owners of Fairfield suffered a financial loss... what they are going to do for us is supply employment for jobless people in our community."[40] Moore suggested that the most important thing to consider was the local economy, and that Fairfielders should recognize that MIU had the potential to restore consumption and employment which he viewed were lacking in the community. This letter to the editor expressed the very kind of optimism that Schmadeka had intended to stir.

However, as the phrase "Transcendental Meditation" circulated around town, many Fairfielders became less enthused about the new arrangement. Those hesitant were entirely unfamiliar with TM, and there was a great deal of suspicion directed toward the institution and

[39] "Buyer Seeks PC Campus," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 6, 1974.
[40] Ronald Moore, "Big boost for local economy," *Fairfield Ledger,* May 20, 1974.

its followers. Some residents seemed to have heard about a group practicing obscure rituals originating far beyond the United States, while others had Red Scare-esque "visions of communists under the bed."[41] Most concerning to these Fairfielders was that a group of coastal meditators were unsuited to the local community. "They were not conventional, small-town Midwestern people," said Tom Thompson, a non-meditating City Councilman as he spoke to local feelings surrounding MIU in the earliest weeks.[42] To residents like Thompson, TM was appeared as a foreign entity that clashed with the small-town, conventional social fabric, and large questions loomed as to how MIU would mesh with the status quo.

Over the month of May, the general wariness coagulated into more precise, religiously-motivated discontent. While Maharishi intended for TM to complement all religions, locals gradually realized that TM was linked to Eastern theology. Several letters to the *Fairfield Ledger* written in May of 1974 show that Fairfielders concluded that TM was a religion that was "diametrically opposed" to Christianity. Native Fairfielder Paul Vaughan wrote a letter to the *Ledger* in late May concluding that TM was deceptive about its religious nature: "Reading about what TMers have to say about themselves… attending their meetings… we find their own statements and those of Maharishi himself enough to convince us of their double-talk." "Double-talk," in this context, was a reference to how Maharishi and his followers insisted TM was non-religious, which apparently contradicted Vaughan's research that TM was based on "pantheistic religious assumptions."[43]

Other locals drew similar conclusions. Betty McNiel of Jefferson County drew a supposed connection between Transcendentalist principles like those of Henry David Thoreau

[41] "Newest Fairfield Issue: Transcendental Meditation," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 10, 1974.
[42] Tom Thompson, "Interview with Tom Thompson, non-meditating City Councilman," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 25, 2019.
[43] Paul Vaughan, "Position on TM Told," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 23, 1974.

and Transcendental Meditation, citing a World Book description of the former that man must "reject the authority of Christianity." McNiel concluded by asking, "is this what Fairfield wants in their community?"[44] While TM did descend from mystic Hindu principles, it was not, as Vaughan had claimed, "diametrically opposed" to Christianity; moreover, McNiel overstated TM's peripheral connection to American Transcendentalism. Nonetheless, these interpretations indicate that the opposition grew out of the belied that TM was incompatible with Christianity.[45]

The first direct confrontation occurred on the morning of May 15th, 1974, when the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce hosted two MIU delegates for an open meeting. According to a *Fairfield Ledger* report, the discussion was "dominated by several local and area ministers who came armed with clippings and references linking Transcendental Meditation to the Hindu religion."[46] Although the delegates assured the clergymen that the practice was "non-religious" in nature, the flames had already been stoked. Four days prior, Faith Baptist Church of Fairfield had taken out a quarter-page ad titled, "Transcendental Meditation: What's It All About?" in which the questions, "Is it a religion?" and "Will TM be propagated here?" were more rhetorical than inquisitive. The church painted Maharishi and TM as insidious entities by referencing Hindu scripture: "When the guru tells you that TM is not a religion," the church writes, "remember that he's probably thinking of the passage from the third chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita… 'Let not him who knows the whole disturb the ignorant who only know the part...'"[47]

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[44] Betty McNiel, "Bible Ruled out by TM," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 9, 1974.
[45] Transcendentalism, Hinduism, and Transcendental Meditation are related, though their shared roots do not extend beyond ancient Indian Vedic tradition. What Maharishi has given the world, according to one TM newsletter, is a "technique brought to light from the oldest continuous tradition of knowledge in the world, the ancient Vedic tradition of India, the tradition that so inspired Thoreau and Emerson." See: Craig Pearson, "Henry David Thoreau" (accessed: April 15, 2020), https://www.tm.org/blog/enlightenment/henry-david-thoreau/.
[46] "Hostile MIU Questions," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 15, 1974.
[47] "Transcendental Meditation: What's it all about?" *Fairfield Ledger*, May 11, 1974.

What the Baptists implied was that MIU intended to convert people in Fairfield, and claimed that the Hindu scripture recommended its followers – those who know "the whole" – keep these intentions hidden from their unwitting targets for conversion – those who "only know the part."

This opposition movement revealed how many locals defined Fairfield as a Christian community. Recall the Baptist Church's newspaper warning from May 1974 which concluded by imploring the reader to "accept no substitutes!" for Jesus Christ. This phrase was not just the outcry of a single church. In fact, many locals believed Fairfield was an inherently Christian place. The sixth chapter of Fairfield historian Susan Fulton Welty's "A Fair Field" – the community's de facto history source – opens by telling the reader that the earliest settlers of Jefferson County were "essentially a religious people," and that "the history of their descendants shows that a religious influence has always been strong."[48] Welty was no doubt referring to Christianity; in the following paragraph, she tallied that eighty-five churches had operated in Jefferson County by the Fairfield centennial in 1939.[49] Even before the centennial there had been evidence to suggest that Fairfielders perceived of their city as possessing a distinctly Christian ethos. In one 1905 editorial in the Fairfield Ledger, resident J. Fred Clarke made the case for a new hospital, arguing that "a christian [sic] community such as ours should have a means of expressing its real charity and brotherly love" in the way that a hospital may afford.[50] In this sense, the Baptist church's call to "Accept no Substitutes!" acted as a reminder of the power of Christianity to define and provide order to the public sphere.

As the years went on and MIU grew despite early tensions, other points of friction developed between the university and its opponents. Notably, non-meditators complained that

[48] "Fairfield's own history book," *Fairfield Ledger*, March 26, 1969.
[49] Susan Fulton Welty, *A Fair Field* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1968), 164.
[50] J. Fred Clarke, "We need a hospital," *Fairfield Ledger*, July 19, 1905.

the meditating community was self-absorbed, and that they refused to integrate into the culture and social norms of Fairfield. One Fairfield woman, Bobby Lowenberg, wrote a scathing open letter to MIU students in June 1979, decrying what she perceived as inconsiderate conduct in public spaces around town. She wrote to students that they were "seemingly uninterested in the community, except when it is to your advantage," and even expressed interest in taking a TM course until she witnessed their "self-absorption" and "seeming withdrawal from the world outside your self-constructed world."[51] Lowenberg insinuated that the inner-mindedness associated with meditation carried over into the daily lives of its practitioners and their interactions with others in a negative way. Carnegie Museum historian and life-long Fairfielder Mark Shafer invoked a long-standing controversy surrounding some meditating homeowners and unkempt landscaping, implying that some "townie-roo" tension could be resolved with a couple of lawn-mowers.[52] Non-meditator resentment expanded beyond religious grounds, and took aim at the meditating community's failure to conform to the norms of small-town life.

This controversy was another indication of how many native Fairfielders understood themselves as a community. Arguably, these locals were put off by the fact that the meditators defied a tradition of communal life that may be traced back to the town's earliest days. Many smaller towns in the West, established in the nineteenth century far from metropolitan centers, have histories marked by stories of self-reliance and communal resolve. For instance, in the "Social Affairs" section of the May 6th, 1869 edition of the *Fairfield Ledger*, one writer declares that "it is folly to think of a town improving and prospering if every citizen of that town and community does not lend all his aid to build up and sustain his neighbor."[53] While the stakes of

[51] Bobby Lowenberg, "Open letter to MIU students," *Fairfield Ledger*, June 1, 1979.
[52] Mark Shafer, "Interview with Mark Shafer, Fairfield Carnegie Museum historian," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 28, 2019.
[53] Social Affairs, "Home Enterprise and Home Industry," *Fairfield Ledger*, May 6, 1869.

rural living were no longer as high in the 1970s as they were in the 1860s, this message suggests that ideals of fellowship and civic collaboration played a significant role in the way its earliest residents imagined their future success. Many years later, town historian Susan Welty wrote that R.B. Louden, Fairfield industrialist and one of the city's most celebrated public figures, was remembered particularly well in town by his invocation to "busy yourself in the affairs of your community" in the decades before and after the turn of the 20th century.[54] When the meditators arrived with their own communal vision – rooted in a meditating practice developed out of a mix of Hindu mysticism and 1960s countercultural idealism – it was bound to conflict with the ideals of domesticity and small-scale "neighborly" collectivity inherited from the town's settler past. The kind of anger vented in Lowenberg's letter was inevitable. Locals perceived that the newcomers failed to internalize the particular community spirit they idealized and viewed as a key component of Fairfield living.

A similar division arose over the sense that the meditators were a worldly, cosmopolitan force that threatened to corrupt local mores. Recall the Baptist church advertisement from May 11th, 1974: "When the guru tells you that TM is not a religion, remember that he's probably thinking of the passage from the third chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita… 'Let not him who knows the whole disturb the ignorant who only know the part...'"[55] As illustrated earlier, the church claimed that meditators were hiding their true motive to proselytize non-meditators. By assuming that meditators were thinking about locals in these terms, the church insinuated that Fairfielders were inherently naïve. Not only did the church attribute "ignorance" to non-meditators, but it presupposed that non-meditators were incapable of recognizing an insidious double motive that was at play. The church asserted that Maharishi had no possible motive beyond coming to

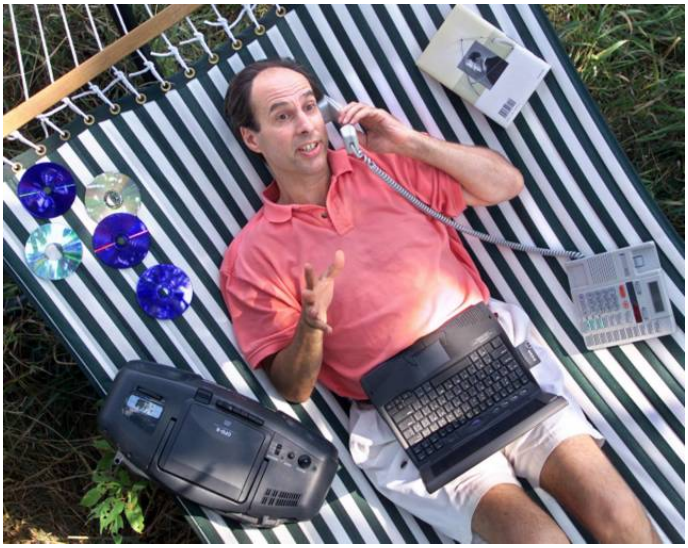
[54] Welty, *A Fair Field*, 206.
[55] *Fairfield Ledger*, May 11, 1974.

indoctrinate the local population, thereby characterizing the people of Fairfield as strictly vulnerable targets for possible conversion. In this sense, the church's warning served to reproduce the parochialism embodied in the "Heartland Myth." For instance, Hoganson quotes an *Illinois Agriculturalist* essay that disproved of farm boys who were eager to see the world, warning that "there is much of the world that is best not seen."[56] Like the warning to the farm boys, the Baptist Church's message perpetuated the myth that the local is at odds with and potentially threatened by the outside world.

In sum, what non-meditating locals identified as incompatibilities shed light on how they imagined the true essence of Fairfield. The themes that emerged in the *Fairfield Ledger* – further channeled through Welty's work – demonstrated that non-meditators positioned themselves on one pole of an ideological spectrum: Christian versus non-Christian, community-minded versus self-absorbed and insular, and finally, local versus worldly. These conflicting categorizations emerged as the focal points of the conflict, with townies charging that the true essence of Fairfield was reflected in each of the former traits; inversely, they assigned the latter, less fitting traits to the meditators. By doing so, oppositional Fairfielders attempted to build a wall between the two groups, and subsequently constructed a narrative about who they always were as a community, and who they should continue to be.

[56] Hoganson, xxi.

Part Three: The Rise of "Silicorn Valley"



Fred Gratzon, meditating entrepreneur and self-professed "world's laziest man."
Source: www.lazyway.blogspot.com/2004/12/

In spite of the undercurrents of local resentment, many of Maharishi's followers found economic success through independent business pursuits. By the end of the 1970s, a spirit of entrepreneurialism arose among many MIU students. Though there was manufacturing and agricultural work in Fairfield, committed meditators found they had to be resourceful when they first arrived. "Everybody couldn't just be a TM instructor like [we were]," said Fred Gratzon, a Rutgers University graduate who, like many other newcomers, taught Transcendental Meditation before moving to Fairfield. Ill-suited for factory work and faced with a surplus of other TM instructors, many meditators turned to entrepreneurship to support themselves. "Early [business owners] would market their goods to each other." Gratzon, who out of necessity founded the Great Midwestern Ice Cream company in Fairfield in 1979, recalled how meditators established a makeshift economy in the earliest days – several of the fledgling startups' founders relied on a bartering system to remain afloat. Though the new financial reality was difficult in the

beginning, Gratzon insists that Maharishi promised that loyal followers would be rewarded "a million times over" for the sacrifices they were to make by coming to Fairfield.[57]

What reinforced Maharishi's deity-like status among the TM community was his prescience. Several of the meditators who answered the call to Fairfield grew their early businesses into multi-million dollar enterprises, literally fulfilling the promise that they would be rewarded "a million times over." After growing the nationally-acclaimed Great Midwestern Ice Cream from the ground up in 1979, Gratzon started Telegroup in Fairfield, a tele-communications firm that was valued at $300 million when it eventually went public in 1997.[58] Another meditator, Hal Goldstein, brought his personal computer skills to Fairfield in 1984 where he built a series of successful, self-published tech newsletters to support his meditating lifestyle. Among other notable companies that emerged out of the early meditator collective were the Cambridge Investment Research group, the Books Are Fun company, and the Chicken Soup for the Soul series.[59]

It is difficult to imagine that Fairfield would have come to experience the same forms of commercial activity had MIU not chosen the city as its landing spot. After all, as Edward Luce noted, rural towns have less frequently been the destinations for college-educated, young Americans eager to support themselves. By the mid-1980s, people in Fairfield and across Iowa had begun to notice what was happening in Fairfield. "There's been a shift in the workforce to a more professional high tech," said Fairfield Mayor Robert Rasmussen, quoted in a 1986 report that cited approximately 400 meditator businesses up from 125 only three years earlier. Also

[57] Fred Gratzon, "Interview with Fred Gratzon, meditating entrepreneur and author," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 28, 2019.
[58] Peter Maass, "Welcome to Silicorn Valley," *Wired*, September 1, 1997, https://www.wired.com/1997/09/callback/.
[59] Chojnowski, Interview.

quoted in the report was Dave Swanson, chairman of the Iowa High Tech Council one hour north in Iowa City: "I think you've got a group of entrepreneurs down there," he remarked, "If we have a course in entrepreneurship, we'd hold it in Fairfield."[60]

The meditator businesses soon thrust Fairfield into the national spotlight. In a 1989 profile of Fairfield-based toy manufacturer Ritam and its sensational "Zube Tube," the *Washington Post* explained that the Ritam founders were among the many successful entrepreneurs associated with the Maharishi school.[61] Only fifteen years after the establishment of Maharishi International University and the arrival of its followers, a national newspaper recognized Fairfield for its high level of creative output generated by its newest inhabitants. The "Zube Tube" piece in the *Washington Post* was also the first of several instances in which the city is referred to as "Silicorn Valley" by large media outlets. The Sili*corn* takeoff, as alluded to earlier, highlights Fairfield's similar concentration of startups among the cornfields. The nickname appeared a year later in the *Los Angeles Times* article, "'Flying University' Draws Meditating Entrepreneurs to Quiet Midwest Town,"[62] and prominently in the *New York Times* piece, "Meditating for Fun and Profit" that appeared soon before Joel Kotkin's *Forbes* piece near the end of the decade.[63]

It is important to point out that the *Washington Post* journalist who wrote the "Zube Tube" piece shrewdly remarked that "local boosters" had been responsible for the nickname. In fact, the spreading of Fairfield's reputation as a rural startup hub can be attributed to public

[60] John W. Kennedy, "Entrepreneurs alter face of local workforce," *Fairfield Ledger,* May 3, 1986.
[61] T.R. Reid, "For Christmas – Bwaaang!!! – It's The Zube Tube," *Washington Post*, December 20, 1989, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/12/20/for-christmas-_-bwaaang-_-its-the-zube-tube/4fc746c2-4d71-4c35-b6ec-7aea3d21edb9/.
[62] Sharon Cohen, "Flying University," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-04-08-mn-1710-story.html.
[63] Andrew Bluth, "Meditating for fun and profit," *New York Times,* September 23, 1998.

relations work conducted by a handful of MIU affiliates. Burt Chojnowski, earlier quoted about the reasons why Fairfield was chosen by MIU, has been one of the most vocal and well-referenced of these community promoters. According to a profile of Fairfield published by UNC Chapel Hill's "Homegrown Tools" program for rural economic development, Chojnowski is an example of the critical "small-town champion":

> In economic development, there is untold value in having a champion or champions who are not shy about tooting the town's horn. For example, Fairfield is known as having more restaurants per capita than San Francisco. This fact is the result of a quick-and-dirty analysis by Burt Chojnowski, Fairfield's No. 1 champion.[64]

This restaurant factoid gained enough traction to be included in a *Des Moines Register* article called, "Why this Iowa town is thriving when so many aren't" in 2016; the piece was re-printed by *USA Today* later that same year.[65] While it is not known to whom exactly the nickname "Silicorn Valley" can be attributed, a meditating "champion" like Chojnowski is the most likely source. According to Chojnowski's website, Burt "helped brand" Fairfield as "the entrepreneurial capital of rural America and 'Silicorn Valley.'"[66]

Chojnowski and other voices from within the TM community have succeeded in building a narrative that highlights the achievements of TM and MIU. In turn, the media has deployed their language, which further solidifies the "Silicorn Valley" brand both locally and globally. What has thus emerged is an accompanying narrative that TM and its followers have transformed Fairfield from an isolated, declining, even backwards town into a globally-connected,

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[64] University of North Carolina, "Fairfield, Iowa." *Homegrown Tools for Economic Development* (July 2017), http://homegrowntools.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/fairfield-1.pdf.
[65] Kevin Hardy, "Why this Iowa town is thriving when so many aren't." *Des Moines Register,* May 31, 2016, https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/2016/05/31/why-iowa-town-thriving-when-so-many-arent/83973154/.
[66] Burt Chojnowski, "Bio" (accessed: April 25, 2020), http://www.brainbelt.com/BrainBelt/Burt_Chojnowski_Bio.html.

enlightened, and cosmopolitan hub of commerce. John Narducci, meditating founder of a large-scale photography startup, stated in a 1990 Associated Press article that, "[We meditators] have put a lot of energy into this town, a lot of money, a lot of talent, and a lot of job opportunities."[67] Ed Malloy, a business-savvy meditator who became mayor in 2001, declared in Goldstein's anthology *Meditating Entrepreneurs* that, "We had to reinvent ourselves, and many of us did so as entrepreneurs. In the process, we reinvented Fairfield."[68] Necessity may have been the mother of invention for many meditators, but they no doubt cultivated within themselves a TM-infused business zeal. In turn, their success wrote a host of stories about the gifts they bestowed on the locals, and in the process unleashed a new myth, one encapsulated by the proliferation of this term "Silicorn Valley."

Indeed, behind the "Silicorn Valley" narrative was the notion that meditators "reinvented" and even enlightened the community. When asked why Fairfield has been a desirable place to live since he arrived in 1981, meditating entrepreneur Hal Goldstein insisted there was streamlined cooperation between the two groups. He asserted that the "indigenous people would do the work, while the visionaries came in with the ideas."[69] Though he also made it clear that there were "down-to-earth" meditators and "entrepreneurial" non-meditators, Goldstein speaks to the idea that there was an enlightened group who arrived to give economic and cultural direction to an aimless community. While this narrative may have been taken as a matter of fact by far-away readers of *Forbes* or *Los Angeles Times* articles, some Fairfield

[67] Sharon Cohen, "Meditation, money merge in America's heartland," *Burlington Hawk Eye,* April 2, 1990.
[68] Hal Goldstein, *Meditating Entrepreneurs: Creating Success from the Stillness Within* (Fairfield: Meditating Press, 2019), 77.
[69] Hal Goldstein, "Interview with Hal Goldstein, meditating entrepreneur and author," Interview by Adam Lipsey, Fairfield, Iowa, August 28, 2019.

townies were less than pleased with its emergence in the press. In 1985, Fairfield native and *Ledger* columnist Larry Johnson wrote,

> As a lot of us in Fairfield know from dealing with the national press, there is a tendency on their part to come into Fairfield, check out the latest TM conference or whatever, and go back to wherever they came from to make the local non-meditating population sound like a bunch of drooling hillbillies straight out of Dogpatch, and the meditators like a collection of Ewoks and other extraterrestrials lifted from *The Return of the Jedi*.[70]

In this op-ed, Johnson derides the media for framing the relationship between the two communities in often belittling ways.

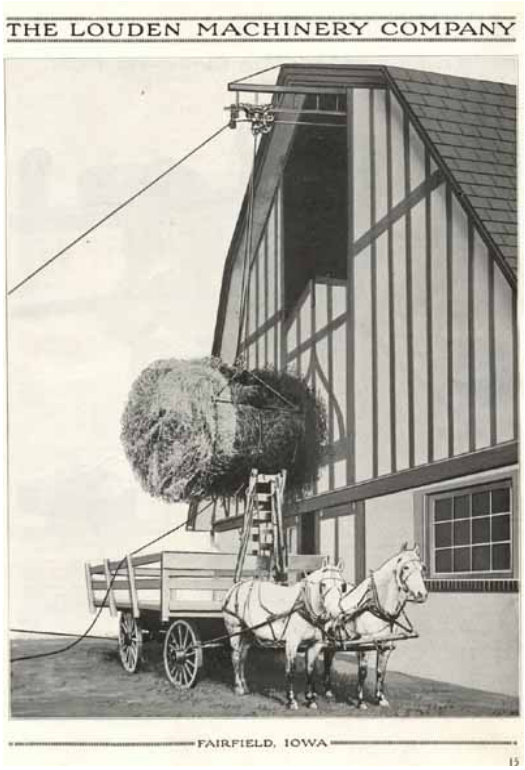
In spite of what some townies perceived as condescending portrayals, Fairfield has still received the kind of press and investment undoubtedly valuable to any small, rural city. Between 1980 and 2020, nearly a billion dollars have been generated by IPOs, mergers, and acquisitions of other Fairfield-based companies, a staggering figure representative of a local economy injected with young, inventive, and oftentimes well-educated newcomers.[71] Yet the narrative that MIU re-defined the town as a hub of innovation was arguably an extension of MIU's original efforts to ingratiate itself with an unreceptive community. That is, the "meditator-as-savior" narrative may be thought of as an extension of the way in which the meditating community presented itself as the viable replacement for Parsons and a lifeline for the city.

First, MIU framed their arrival in terms of how the Parsons closure left Fairfielders fearing and desiring for their community. As MIU associates built their companies, the meditating community popularized their entrepreneurship in a rural city thirsting for intellectual, human, and financial capital. In fact, the "Silicorn Valley" narrative – as proposed by members of the meditating community and the media – generally glossed over the history of Fairfield before Maharishi's touch-down in 1974. By way of centering their own achievements and

[70] Larry Johnson, "Anticipation," *Fairfield Ledger*, August 20, 1985.
[71] Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association, "Fairfield Edge 2011," *Fairfield Edge Magazine* (2011).

benevolence, the meditators occluded a pre-existing history of entrepreneurship and enduring industrialism in Fairfield. On a basic level, the concept that an entrepreneurial environment was constructed by newcomers in the 1970s is fundamentally at odds with Fairfield's actual history.

Part Four: An Enterprising History



The top-of-the-line, "Senior" hay carrier, Louden Machinery Company, c. 1920.
Sources: Shafer Interview; http://www.jeffersoncountyiowa.com/barns/louden/26.htm

Several groundbreaking inventions originated in Fairfield well before Maharishi himself was born. Perhaps most emblematic of this history was a man named William Louden, who arrived in Fairfield as a teenager in 1842. Susan Welty described Louden as the most successful of the manufacturing pioneers that came out of the town's earlier generations.[72] Beset with illness from a young age, Louden was unable to perform manual labor; he instead turned his attention to refining the existing systems of farm work. The Fairfielder's most iconic contraption was the barn hay carrier, a pulley and track system that allowed farmers to load hay bales more quickly and voluminously into their barns. According to a 1998 National Register of Historic

[72] Welty, 279.

Places form prepared by Jefferson County historians, William Louden's contributions to dairy farming are comparable to "those of John Deere and Cyrus McCormick to grain farming."[73] Louden's ingenuity made him a celebrated figure not only in Fairfield lore, but in the national history of farming and agriculture.

Louden earned a local reputation for his persistence and devotion to his creative projects. While Louden's first patent for a hay carrier was dated to 1866, the *Fairfield Ledger* reported in autumn of 1871 that "Mr. William Louden, ever anxious to excel in his farm machinery, has been to work and made a great improvement on his heretofore excellent hay carrier… With this improvement, competent judges say it is now the best hay carrier made.[74] However, a series of financial setbacks halted his progress in the mid-1870s, coinciding with the Panic of 1873. According to a chronology Louden wrote in retrospect, "everything was swept away" by the crisis.[75]

Although the 1870s were difficult, Louden resumed working in 1879. Based on his own recollection, he "didn't give up. [I] spent seven years up in the cobweb region developing the Hay Carrier industry." After this retreat to the dark and dusty hayloft of his barn, Louden regained his footing. By the early 1890s, he opened a new factory in Downtown Fairfield and formally incorporated the Louden Machinery Company. The company then expanded internationally with the addition of a Canadian plant in 1900, followed by other American

[73] William Page and Joanne Walroth, "The Louden Machinery Company, Fairfield, Iowa," *Jefferson County Historic Preservation Commission* (Fairfield: January 31, 1998), https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/64500169_text.
[74] Local Miscellany, "Improved Hay Carrier," *Fairfield Ledger*, September 7, 1871.
[75] William Page, "The Louden Machinery Company, Fairfield, Iowa"; The "cobweb region" of a barn is also known as the hayloft, a dark and dusty area where hay is stored.

factories in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Albany.[76] His commitment to path-breaking farm technology earned him and his business sales in excess of $2.5 million by 1920.[77]

By 1886, civic leaders in Fairfield had recognized a growing trend of local industrialism – spearheaded by Louden – and laid the groundwork for further creative output in the city. That year, the Fairfield City Directory was published with a listing of businesses, organizations, and a general assessment of the state of the community.[78] In this summary of Fairfield's civic affairs, the directory stated that the city had "very recently constructed a very complete system of water works at a cost of $57,000… the improvement in itself is indicative of the thrift and enterprise of its people." The report went on to praise the city's strong industrial base, and predicted that "with the fine inducement we are able to offer, it is confidently expected that others will soon be added."[79]

The following year, Fairfield's innovative efforts paid off when another inventor by the name of Joel Turney brought his business to town. Thirty years before, Turney founded the Charter Oak Wagon Company in nearby Trenton, Iowa in 1856. After honing his skills as a wagon repairman, Turney eventually scaled from repairs to wagon manufacturing, and was soon filling much of the regional wagon demand generated by the Civil War. Once the war concluded, the company pivoted to shipping their wagons "to the new country opening in the west."[80] The growing frontier created further demand for wagons, and in 1887, Turney decided to move to the larger city of Fairfield. There, as Welty noted, the company took advantage of the city's

[76] Welty, 287.
[77] William Page, "The Louden Machinery Company, Fairfield, Iowa"; translates to roughly $32 million in 2020 dollars.
[78] Bill Baker, "1886 City Directory: A bit of history," *Fairfield Ledger*, June 4, 1981.
[79] Welty, 284.
[80] Melvin Gingerich, "Trenton," *The Palimpsest* 22, no. 2 (1941), 35, https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2296&context=palimpsest.

advanced water and railroad infrastructure to increase production. Turney soon became Fairfield's largest industrial employer.[81]

The decision to relocate his operations to Fairfield turned out to be quite fruitful for Turney. The founder supposedly lived to see his company develop the capacity to increase production by "ten-fold" which, according to a *Fairfield Ledger* profile soon after his death, would have been a source of "no little congratulation to the mechanic who had started into manufacturing with only $100 capital, a strong arm and a capacity for many hard day's work back of it."[82] Turney's 1905 *Fairfield Tribune* obituary emphasized his inventiveness, in which admirers described him as "one of the pioneer manufacturers of the west," and "a self-made man in the strictest sense of the word."[83] Though the concerted, civic effort to renovate Fairfield's infrastructure played a role in Turney's success, it was ultimately Turney himself who had the knack to harness these systems to his own ends.

Long before the meditators arrived, Fairfield was home to inventors who would be called "entrepreneurs" in the modern vernacular. Like many American towns in an expanding capitalist system of market development, Fairfield benefited from and contributed to the growth of national industry, communications and emerging technologies. Even rural businesses with useful ideas and access to investment capital could capitalize on a growing market for goods of all kinds. Companies like Louden and Turney fed the growth of Fairfield and many places like it through a process of symbiosis: Turney thrived by bringing his business to a growing Fairfield, and Fairfield benefited from its decision to invest in cutting-edge infrastructure.

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[81] Welty, 285.
[82] Local Miscellany, "Close of a Useful Life, *Fairfield Ledger*, July 5, 1905.
[83] Personal, "Death of Joel Turney," *Fairfield Tribune*, June 28, 1905.

Nonetheless, Louden and Turney's companies were merely the first in a long line of Fairfield enterprises that stretched into the 20th century. In many cases, subsequent local enterprise was closely tied to the two earliest examples. In 1904, Louden's descendants in charge of the firm decided to make their own malleable iron instead of outsourcing like the firm had historically done. The Loudens "purchased the equipment of a malleable iron foundry…, brought it to Fairfield," and from that time forward, "played a key role in the ownership and operations of the firm."[84] This plant would become the Iowa Malleable Iron Company, still going strong when the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce described it in a 1929 informational pamphlet as "the only [of its kind] in Iowa, and one of the first established west of the Mississippi River." The description goes on to say that the factory was "one of the first malleable foundries in the world to melt and anneal successfully with oil," and for that reason has been "visited by hundreds of foundry-men from all over the world."[85]

Aided in part by a nationwide economic boom, Fairfield industrial enterprise found further success after World War II. One notable figure in this period was August van Lantschoot, a 40-year employee of Iowa Malleable, who left the firm to start his own aluminum casting business in 1946. The aptly-named Fairfield Aluminum Castings Company (FALCO) started by producing cast aluminum parts and equipment for local and regional manufacturers within a six-hundred mile radius, and had expanded quickly enough to add eight new factory additions by 1964.[86] In 1970, the city of Fairfield honored Lantschoot with a community service award, recognizing the Belgian immigrant as "the grand old man of Fairfield industry" whose business

[84] William Page, "Iowa Malleable Iron Company," *Jefferson County Historic Preservation Commission* (Fairfield: January 8, 1999), https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75336776.
[85] City of Fairfield, Iowa, "Fairfield Chamber of Commerce Brochure," *Fairfield Chamber of Commerce,* 1929.
[86] William Page, "Iowa Malleable Iron Company."

acumen had contributed to the "success story of several Fairfield industries" that relied on his products and guidance.[87]

Indeed, local industry thrived well into the 20th century—and helped to ensure that long before the meditators arrived, Fairfield had written its own story about innovation and what would be thought of as entrepreneurship today. In fact, many other small and medium-sized Midwestern cities had similar histories of business growth in the hundred-year period of American industrial expansion between the Civil War and the 1960s, but local stories tended to dwell on local pluck, talent, and communal industriousness. For instance, Iowa Malleable and Fairfield Aluminum spawned from William Louden's original enterprise, and their success lends credence to the idea that a pre-existing history of enterprise existed in Fairfield. As secretary-treasurer of the Louden Machinery Company Thomas Louden wrote in 1963:

> Fairfield's industry is the envy of many other Iowa communities… But do we ever stop to realize that we are in this position only because of the foresight of our forefathers?... These men were community leaders and didn't easily accept defeat. They got the railroads, and a water system designed to supply industry and encourage plants to come here. Thus began our industrial climb… Many others carried on this tradition… With this heritage, is it any wonder that many of the industries here were established by employees of other industries?... My only wish would be that we have the intelligence to preserve this same heritage for the future of this wonderful city.[88]

Louden asserted that Fairfield had a strong, industrial base that was thriving at the time of his writing in the early 1960s. However, he also argued that a legacy of entrepreneurship and astute business decisions had nurtured this "industrial climb" since the 19th century. In other words, Thomas Louden considered contemporary enterprises like Malleable Iron and Fairfield Aluminum Casting to be the latest manifestations of the community's deeply-ingrained, entrepreneurial culture.

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[87] "Gamrath 1969 'Man of Year,'" *Fairfield Ledger*, March 10, 1970.
[88] Welty, 300.

In sum, this survey demonstrates that there was a longstanding narrative of "entrepreneurialism" in Fairfield, on top of which the newcomers had superimposed and publicized their own story of entrepreneurship. As Stan Plum put it when I asked him about meditator startups, the new companies represented an "exclamation point at the end of a long sentence" of local entrepreneurialism.[89] Yet this "long sentence" has been overshadowed by the "Silicorn Valley" narrative that functioned to ingratiate MIU with an unreceptive community. The narrative that MIU gifted Fairfield an entrepreneurial culture and its accompanying economic benefits was arguably a strategy to neutralize resentment and legitimize their place in a seemingly incompatible environment. In this sense, the stories of William Louden, Joel Turney and other Fairfield enterprises discredit the narrative that MIU was the germ of innovation in Fairfield.

At the same time, the "meditator-as-savior" narrative was not alone in contradicting Fairfield's true past. To reiterate, townies often characterized Fairfield as a community-oriented, small town where TM and its cosmopolitan, worldly rituals were fundamentally incompatible. In reality, Louden and the entrepreneurial vision he represented contests the idea that Fairfield was an inherently local and insulated place. According to Hoganson, the "Heartland Myth" withers in light of the "mesh of relationships, many not domestic in nature, lying at the center of the nation."[90] So too does Fairfield's iteration of the myth wither when held up to the light of its industrial heritage. In addition to the Louden factories built far from the flagship plant in Fairfield, the products themselves gained traction in distant places. One advertisement by the company "C. Johnson & Son" based in Baldur, Manitoba declared that, "The Louden Hay Carrier Line is in a class by itself. We carry a complete line of Tracks, Carrier Cars and

[89] Plum, Interview.
[90] Hoganson, 300.

[illegible] and any necessaries, to make you a complete job… The LOUDEN goods win on their merits."[91] Forty years later, Louden's products remained in widespread circulation, marketed in "good condition" in the Huron, South Dakota classified section.[92] Not only did Louden's "entrepreneurship" generate hundreds of jobs near and far, but his products intertwined the agricultural and economic processes of Fairfield with those of countless communities around the world.

Similar to Louden's far-reaching hay stackers, Joel Turney's Charter Oak wagons were part of a trading network that linked Fairfield with places far from Southeastern Iowa. While the Civil War provided the opportunity for Turney to pivot from wagon repair to building, the Charter Oak company achieved greater success by later supporting America's post-war expansion westward. After all, "the mightiest migration in the history of the American frontier" occurred between the years 1870 and 1900.[93] Turney and his company rode this wave of migration, and his wagons became instruments used to cultivate the western frontier. For example, an 1896 newspaper advertisement reveals that Charter Oak wagons were sold by a merchant in Crook County, Wyoming – praising them as "the best made" – only eight years after the county was officially organized in 1888.[94] This indicates that Charter Oak wagons were recognized for their superior quality, and helped to establish a fledgling community eight-hundred miles west of Fairfield. Another interesting connection was made in 2007 when a Fairbanks, Alaska area man lent to a local theatre production his Charter Oak wagon which was

[91] C. Johnson & Son, "The Louden Hay Carrier Line…" *Baldur Gazette*, July 14, 1910, www.newspaperarchive.com.
[92] Ed Miedema, "For Sale – Used Louden," *Huron Daily Plainsman*, June 5, 1950, www.newspaperarchive.com.
[93] R. A. Billington, *The Westward Movement in the United States* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1959).
[94] F.E. Rounds, "Rounds sells the Charter Oak Wagon – the best made," *Crook County Monitor,* August 19, 1896, www.newspaperarchive.com.

"bought in Kansas and brought to Alaska."[95] These examples highlight how Charter Oak wagons may be traced across the United States and its development westward, and remained relevant as distant as Alaska and as recent as 2007. In this sense, the essence of Fairfield – represented in everything from raw material, labor, and inventive heritage that culminated in a Charter Oak wagon – extended far beyond the city limits.

Furthermore, companies like Iowa Malleable and FALCO continued to establish outer linkages for Fairfield in the same fashion as Louden and Turney. Malleable Iron attracted to Fairfield both foreign and domestic observers looking to adopt best practices in iron casting, who would presumably return to their respective communities and introduce these processes that developed in Fairfield. On the other hand, FALCO eventually distributed its castings both locally, regionally, and internationally. According to FALCO's National Registry of Historic Places profile, the factory's strategic position along the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad line provided for "efficient transportation for… finished goods out of [the factory]" to most of the Midwest; by 1966, the firm had begun fulfilling orders for manufacturers as far away as California, New Jersey, and Canada.[96] Well into the 1960s, Fairfield continued to be the cradle of successful industries that wove themselves into the economic fabric of large cities across the continent, and whose physical products themselves became parts of economic systems over 850 miles away from their origin. Fairfield was not an insular, rural community blissfully detached from the national and global economy that carried the United States to prosperity and world dominance in these years.

[95] Dermot Cole, "FLOT opens 'Oklahoma!' this weekend on authentic wheels, thanks to readers," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, November 13, 2007.
[96] William Page, "Iowa Malleable Iron Company"; "Fairfield Aluminum Castings Co.," *Fairfield Ledger,* October 28, 1966.

With this history brought to light, a return to the discussion of Fairfield when Parsons closed and MIU arrived is essential. As captured earlier, the school's closure in May of 1973 brought economic uncertainty to locals after Parsons closed, but the economic data indicates that, thanks to its industrial sector, Fairfield's economy continued to chug ahead with barely a hitch. According to a late July 1973 newspaper report, Fairfield employment actually increased 2.3 percent from May to June, and was up 5.6 percent since June of 1972. Despite agreeing that the loss of $150,000 in paychecks each month "will definitely hurt," Fairfield's Chamber of Commerce president Gordon Aistrope correctly predicted on June 10th, 1973 that "Fairfield's dependence upon the college as a primary source of income has decreased since 1967 when Parsons was prospering… we have a strong industrial base which will support the economy."[97] Dividing approximately $11 million that industrial workers earned in 1966 by twelve months, and then calculating the difference between this figure and the $150,000 earned by Parsons employees, we can determine that the industrial sector generated approximately $735,000 more in Fairfield paychecks per month.

There were several other economic indicators which not only confirmed Aistrope's assessment of Fairfield's strong industrial base, but also refuted the centrality of Parsons to the town's economic vitality. First, from 1950 into the 1960s – before the Parsons turn-around in the late 1950s – Fairfield's industrial sector was more productive than it had been in years. The month of November 1965 saw manufacturing employment up 56.8 percent since the same month in 1950; by 1966, factories employed 1,800 Fairfielders, a significantly higher number than the

[97] Norman Sandler, "College Closed, but Fairfield Optimistic," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, June 10, 1973, www.newspaperarchive.com.

175 employed at the college.[98] While it may have seemed like Parsons' expansion catalyzed industry and other facets of the local economy, it is crucial to note that this phase of Fairfield's industrial growth began five years before Millard Roberts ushered in Parsons' rise in 1955.

Year	Quarter	Retail Sales	Change (YOY)	Growth Rate (SE Iowa Cities)
1973	Q1	$7,760,483	15%	First
	Q2	$8,108,399	16.30%	Third
	Q3	$8,613,076	14.20%	First
	Q4	**$10,345,930**	**25.20%**	***First****
1974	Q1	$8,464,187	9%	First
	Q2	$8,833,189	8.90%	Third

Table 6: Retail Sales in Fairfield from 1973 (first quarter) until 1974 (second quarter). **Quarter immediately following Parsons closure.* Source: *Fairfield Ledger*

Second, Fairfield retail sales data suggested that local merchants were unhindered by the loss of the "deep-pocketed" college crowd. Below, Table 6 shows that in 1973, Fairfield had consistently posted either fastest or third-fastest retail sales growth in Southeastern Iowa. Parsons ceased operations in late spring of 1973, or in the third quarter of that year. Yet even with several hundred fewer students and faculty patronizing the downtown, Fairfield retailers managed to post record sales in the fourth quarter. It is important to take into account the 1973-75 national recession, which did not begin until the end of Fairfield's remarkable fourth quarter in 1973. In the first quarter of 1974 – by which time the recession was in full swing – Fairfield businesses still generated a nearly 10 percent increase over the previous first quarter in 1973.[99] Assuming that the 1973-75 recession caused a universal drop in American consumer spending, Fairfield still recorded the fastest growth rate in Southeastern Iowa for the fourth time in five quarters, indicating that Fairfield's economy continued to excel within the broader region.

[98] "Employment in Fairfield High for November," *Fairfield Ledger,* December 18, 1965; "Fairfielders Join Industrial Salute," *Fairfield Ledger*, October 28, 1966.
[99] National Bureau of Economic Research, "U.S. Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions," *NBER Public Information Office,* September 20, 2010, https://www.nber.org/cycles.html.

What this history reveals is that MIU did not fill an urgent economic void when it arrived. As captured in earlier newspaper sources, there was a sense that Parsons' closure meant economic disaster for the community; after all, many residents linked the city's overall vitality to Parsons. However, the city's independently-thriving industrial sector and steady retail sales refute the idea that Fairfield had or needed a college as its primary economic engine. While the college may have been doomed, it did not put Fairfield on a foreseeable path to demise.

Though Fairfield industry showed no signs of weakening when Parsons closed, local factory employment would eventually drop from a peak of 2,400 in 1979 to 1,400 workers in 1984. The drop coincided with what Mayor Rasmussen in 1986 labelled a workforce "shift" to the aforementioned small businesses and professional technology services spawned by the meditators.[100] Nevertheless, the mayor characterized the statistic as a workforce shift, and does not prove that the meditators saved a faltering, local economy in the 1980s, either. Whether workers left factory jobs voluntarily or involuntarily is not indicated by the data from 1979-1984. What is evident is that there was no ensuing economic downturn in the six years after Parsons closed, and Fairfield industry was already on an upswing when MIU arrived.

[100] *Fairfield Ledger,* May 3, 1986.

Conclusion

In 2000, the Fairfield-born, folk musician Greg Brown released an album with a track titled, "Fairfield." As a variety of blue grass banjos and fiddles dance around his deep drawl, Brown tells a story of how MIU redeemed the city of Fairfield:

> There's a whole lotta money in Fairfield, I'm gonna get me some. / Them floaters they come down here… Fix the whole town up. / They meditate and get focused… They do a little hocus pocus, and the money just rolls in. / They know all 'bout computers, your New Age, and foreign food… They do all that real good, Fairfield's where to go.[101]

These "floaters" are a reference to the meditators who, according to Brown, "fixed the whole town up," seemingly through magic. Take for example The Raj, a spa and treatment center opened in 1993. The facility is the only one of its kind outside of India, "specifically built to offer the traditional Ayurvedic detoxification treatments, known as Panchakarma." The Raj's website suggests to the reader: "Transform yourself. Transform the world."[102] TM-associated businesses like this one continue to bring in customers and their cash, certainly notwithstanding what Brown would judge as its "hocus-pocus"-like eccentricity.

Meditators have no doubt supported Fairfield's vitality into the 21st century. Without them and their ventures that started taking off around the turn of the 1980s, it is possible that Fairfield may eventually have succumbed to the deindustrializing, global forces that have wreaked havoc on its neighbors and the broader Midwest since the 1970s. Yet the common tune that MIU's arrival saved Fairfield – sung by meditators, international publications, and folk singers alike – is based less in historical reality than it is in local mythology. First of all, there

[101] Greg Brown, "Fairfield," track 7 on *Over and Over* (Trailer Records, 2000), https://genius.com/Greg-brown-fairfield-lyrics.
[102] "About the Raj, " *The Raj* (accessed: April 20, 2020), https://theraj.com/about-us/.

was no indication that Fairfield's fate was tied to the existence of a local college. Based on positive retail sales, a healthy industrial profile, and other data before and after its closure, Parsons College did not serve the vital, economic role as many Fairfielders had perceived. Fairfield's industrial sector hummed along in the background; as one astute Parsons trustee put it a few days after Parsons closed, the blow to the community was "more psychological than anything else."[103] Indeed, the "Heartland Myth" seemed to be on full display in the days, weeks and months following the closure, as Fairfielders mourned the loss of Parsons, a brick-and-mortar representation of the tight-knit, local, Christian community itself. When MIU first appeared as a college with promise for the local economy, some locals welcomed the replacement. But Hoganson's myth surfaced once more when many townies detected an unfamiliar religious aura around TM, sparking a feud encompassing religion, culture and what does or does not belong in the "Heartland."

The resourcefulness demonstrated by the meditators should not be understated. However, in trying to negotiate and explain the disputes that arose when they arrived in town, the meditators seemed to have effectively sold a story of salvation and entrepreneurship that arose out of their own necessity and enlightenment. By perpetuating the notion of a novel, Midwestern iteration of Silicon Valley, the meditators and the ensuing media coverage occluded a much older story of innovation in the cornfields – and the national and international linkages Fairfield established during the long era of U.S. national economic expansion. Of course, the non-meditating opposition also made oversights in how they characterized Fairfield. Namely, many townies rejected TM's foreignness and the meditator's individualistic tendencies despite the

[103] "Severe Blow to Fairfield – 'Insurmountable Odds' Close Parsons Doors," *Fairfield Ledger,* June 1, 1973.

outside linkages and what we would now recognize as entrepreneurial individualism that had been in Fairfield since the late 1800s.

This paper set out to investigate the *Forbes* magazine claim that Fairfield was "changed" from a "hick town" to what some locals call "Silicorn Valley." In many ways, MIU did change Fairfield. On a macro level, the large concentration of meditator businesses undoubtedly earned Fairfield an international reputation as a rural hub for tech startups. On the micro level, the casual observer requires no more than a drive across town to recognize TM's impact on the community. Those renovated houses with their front doors blocked and side entrances added? They are almost all occupied by meditators, "rectified" to face east in accordance with the Maharishi Sthapatya Veda: a complex, Hindu-derived code for living in alignment with nature.[104] These homes are perhaps the most literal examples of how meditators changed Fairfield.

Still, a survey of Fairfield's industrial record reveals that, like many small Midwestern cities before deindustrialization, Fairfield was laden with innovators and global enterprise well in advance of MIU. Within this broader context, meditator entrepreneurship should be understood as an extension of this history. While investigating whether Fairfield was "changed," the paper also examined the adjunct question of whether Fairfield was saved by these purported changes. While MIU saved the town-gown relationship, Fairfield had an enduring industrial base that was more economically vital than the town-gown relationship; in this sense, MIU did not save the city of Fairfield as a whole.

In any kind of localized conflict, the involved groups often engage with the relevant historical context in different, even contradictory ways. The parties tend neatly to divide along

[104] Scott Lowe, "The Neo-Hindu Transformation of an Iowa Town," *Nova Religio* 13, no. 3 (2010), 86.

older fault lines that resemble, influence, or even create the divisions of their current feud. What happened in Fairfield, Iowa runs counter to this familiar trend. What arose there in the early 1970s were two competing groups who ended up positioning themselves relative to local history in a very similar way; that is, both the meditators and the locals made historical omissions that were closely related. The story of Fairfield's forgotten history shows that two conflicting narratives can end up making a similar presumption – in this case, taking for granted that Fairfield was a token of the "Heartland Myth" – even when the parties arrive to the presumption from completely different angles. Fairfield is a testament to how groups can rely on a similar interpretation of history even when their current objectives are very much in tension.

In no uncertain terms, Fairfield, Iowa played host to a unique confrontation in 1974 when thousands of coastal, New Age idealists arrived. As this paper has shown, the prevailing myth that Maharishi and his followers have fundamentally "changed" Fairfield is not an outgrowth of careless journalism. Rather, it is the consequence of a narrative perpetuated by meditator and non-meditator alike, tied up in myths of what rural America is and is not. In fact, most meditators and non-meditators may even agree with Joel Kotkin that Fairfield was a "hick town" that became "Silicorn Valley," only the disagreement lies in whether Fairfield was corrupted or enlightened from this original state. Yet a closer examination of local history reveals that Fairfield was never quite a "hick town" in the ways it was imagined by each side. Though Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, with his mantras and flowing robes, was nothing like Fairfielders had ever seen, the "townies" and the "roos" were cut from a very similar cloth.

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