

ST. CHARLES, ILLINOIS - THE PRIDE OF THE FOX

Written by June Grayson

It's 19,000 residents will tell You quite simply: St.

Charles, Illinois, is the best of all possible worlds.

This 150 year old town, nestled on both banks of the

Fox River one hour west of Chicago's Loop, seeks to preserve its small town charm and conservative values while it confronts the inevitable challenges of urban expansion.

That it is able to do this successfully is a tribute

to the tenacity and vision of its local merchants, entrepreneurs, and governmental officials.

The beautiful river has always been the heart of St.

Charles. Prehistoric Indians built their burial mounds on its banks. The Fox, Sac, Winnebagos, and Pottawattomie Indian tribes fished its waters. Yankee settlers from New England built their log cabins on the river banks where the Main Street bridge is now. The town grew as it provided support for the expanding farm community.

Farms still adjoin St. Charles but now the wooded

hills hide housing developments instead of corn fields.

Homesteading in St. Charles is no longer cheap,

however. New homes and townhouses range in price from \$98,900 to \$300,000. If you have your own lot and builder, you are limited only by your imagination and bank account. In fact, one of the few complaints about St. Charles is that "our children can't afford to buy a home here."

Still, those dollars purchase considerably more

quality of life in St. Charles than in some of the larger nearby communities. In addition, home buyers who some day may face a

corporate transfer are convinced that the St. Charles area offers the best real estate investment around.

St. Charles commuters can take the Northwestern train in nearby Geneva or easily access the tollways by driving ten miles either north or south. That is just far enough so that St. Charles has been able to avoid the congestion and rampant commercial development that plague the communities adjoining the burgeoning I-90 and I-5 corridors.

"We intend to keep the small town flavor of St. Charles," says Mayor Fred Norris, "by continually upgrading its natural beauty. We have developed a comprehensive community Plan. We have laws against commercial strip zoning. In some areas we insist on a 50 foot green belt setback between highway and buildings to enhance appearances."

St. Charles has almost completed the beautification of its river banks. Its 22 miles of bike trails are part of a trail that now extends from Aurora to South Elgin and eventually to Dundee. St. Charles police patrol its share of the trails to prevent vandalism.

The St. Charles Park District has 650 acres of parks, open space, and green belts under its jurisdiction. By comparison, Geneva and Batavia to the south, with populations similar to St. Charles, have 150 acres and 100 acres respectively.

The public school system gets high marks from parents seeking to maximize their children's educational opportunities. The high school swim team is championship material. How many other high schools in towns of 19,000 have an adjoining sports and recreation building with an Olympic size swimming pool and a cultural arts center with professional stage equipment available for high school drama and music performances?

Moreover, these amenities were not purchased only with tax dollars. Indeed, newcomers may not even be aware that the quality of life that attracted them to St. Charles is due in large part to the generosity of local philanthropists, the Baker and Norris families. They were the heirs of "Bet-A-Million" Gates, who made a fortune in barbed wire and Texaco oil around the turn of the century. His wealth transformed this sleepy little river town into a prosperous community brimming with cultural advantages.

No fairy godmother could have done more. Their gifts financed the following St. Charles improvements in whole or in part: Baker Community Center, Hotel Baker, .Baker Methodist Church, Arcada Theater, St. Charles National Bank, the State Bank of St. Charles, Delnor Hospital, St. Charles Country Club, Municipal Center, Illinois Street four lane bridge, and for the new high school, Norris Recreation Center, and Norris Cultural Arts Building.

Still, St. Charles is not immune to problems. "We have downtown congestion from the convergence of Highways 64, 31, and 25," according to Mayor Norris. "Studies show that one of three cars in the downtown area is only passing through. If we can provide a third Fox River bridge for a Highway 64 bypass, we can relieve that congestion and improve the downtown business district at the same time."

Downtown St. Charles can still use help. When outlying malls enticed downtown merchants, Main Street was left with empty stores and underutilized commercial space.

When economic deterioration sets in, social deterioration will follow. Then it may be too late to revitalize

an area.

Fortunately, merchants and entrepreneurs prevented social deterioration in St. Charles. According to Terry Grove, local businessman and real estate developer, "You have to provide new reasons for people to come into the downtown area. You have to draw tourists as well as residents. You do this by creating an image of downtown as a place to go to have fun."

Jane Moore, local interior decorator, developed the first specialty shopping area in downtown St. Charles, the successful and picturesque "Century Corners". Grove and his wife saw possibilities in an empty Catholic church, converting it into one of the Valley's finest restaurants and also a part of the revitalized "Old St. Charles" district.

Grove promoted the concept of St. Charles as the new Antique Center of the midwest. He converted several empty downtown buildings into Antique Markets I, II, and III.

Don Kahn, Bruce Olerking, and Richard Berkout, St. Charles entrepreneurs - in a great leap of faith in St. Charles - converted some abandoned factory buildings into two exciting

shopping areas - Fox Island Square and the Piano Factory Mall.

Now additional private investors, showing their faith in the are constructing the first new building in the down town in ten years. The plan will use the "mini-mall" concept, where the main entrances front on private courts instead of a busy street.

This is only the first step in a plan now before the City Council that seeks to develop multiple mini-malls throughout the whole downtown.

Clearly, St. Charles is on a roll. The central business district lives. The river is clean again. The fish are biting. Even the Indians are coming back

Thanks to the efforts of a non-profit committee headed by Joe Anderson and Max Hunt, local businessmen, St. Charles will install a huge bronze statue of a magnificent Pottawattomie Indian in October, 1987.

The statue on the east bank of the Fox River will be visible from the Main Street bridge.

The Pottawattomie befriended the early St. Charles settlers. Now St. Charles honors those caretakers who bequeathed . .to them this lovely Eden.

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Sidebar

A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

ST. CHARLES, ILLINOIS -THE PLACE YOU GO TO HAVE FUN

Written by June Grayson

An antique lover's dream of heaven must look something like St. Charles. St. Charles is now recognized as the antique capital of mid-America.

Governor "Big Jim" Thompson has been known to buy and sell at the Kane County Flea Market, the largest Antique Flea Market in the world.

Held the first Sunday of each month the year around,
it has never been canceled - rain, sleet, snow, and blizzards
notwithstanding.

Over a quarter million visitors a year pay the modest
\$2.00 admission fee to rummage through the wares of over 1,000
dealers indoors and out. Gates open at 7.00 am and you can buy a
hearty breakfast on the grounds (312-377-2252).

Bring plenty of energy and money because it would be
a shame if you did not also visit the more than 70 additional
antique dealers clustered in several downtown buildings. All are
within easy walking distance of one another on or near Main

Street, Highway 64, on both sides of the Fox River.
"Shared clerking" arrangements enable them all to stay open daily
the year around, including many holidays.

Plan to attend the special interest antique, crafts,
and collectibles shows scheduled throughout the year at the new
RIVER EXPO Center on the Fox River or the new MEGA Center at
Pheasant Run Resort east of town.

Coordinate your buying or "just-looking" sprees with

special events planned throughout the year: the Greek Festival in May, the famous Mid-American Canoe Race in June, the Scarecrow Festival in October, and the Christmas Tree Showcase in December.

You may #also enjoy the Piano Factory Mall¹, a newly opened center reborn in an abandoned factory on the Fox River. Its 500 parking spaces are jammed every weekend.

If museums are your thing, you will find them in St. Charles. The William Beith House, one of the few surviving Limestone dwellings in the Greek Revival style, is just north of the Piano Factory Mall. The Durant-Hunt Museum is a few blocks northeast of the downtown business district. The Durant-Peterson House and the Pioneer Sholes School have been lovingly restored at the LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve. The Garfield Farm Museum (312-584-8485) is now being developed as an 1840s working farm. All of these museums are usually open on Sunday afternoon throughout the summer as well as other times by special appointment.

Plan on Sunday Brunch at Hotel Baker (312-584-2100) with its Art Deco styling and outdoor rose gardens. Savor the homemade soups and rich Pennsylvania Dutch desserts at the

Inglenook Pantry (312-377-0373). Dine in splendor at the Old Church Inn with its real pews for seating and stained glass windows for the repose of your soul. Overlook the river from the picture windows of Salerno's On The Fox (312-584-7000) or the Manor Restaurant (312-584-2469). Sit on the outdoor deck under the colorful umbrellas of the Eric and Me Riverside Tavern (312-377-9222).

Pig out just this once on Colonial Ice Cream, a favorite hometown treat, at its two restaurants in town (312-584-0088). The Galleon with its New Orleans decor and Cajun cooking (312-377-3333) and Rex's Cork & Fork with its scrumptious salad bar (312-584-6708) are on the east side. You can probably find your favorite franchise restaurant either east or west of downtown on Main Street.

If you conclude that you can't do all of this in one day, arrange a getaway weekend at the Best Western Inn (312-584-4550), the Dunham Inn (312-584-5300), the Pheasant Run Resort (312-584-6300), or one of the charming little bed and breakfast inns.

For further information, contact the St. Charles

Visitors and Convention Bureau, POB 11, St. Charles, Illinois

60174, telephone 312-377-6161.

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