

# Cambridge City now a regional destination

Antiques, dining and history draw tourists to 'biggest little town on the road'

Published in the Indianapolis Star 4/4/2016

Revised 4/13/2016

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## CAMBRIDGE CITY

— A limousine with an Iowa license plate was just one of the vehicles parked along Cambridge City's Main Street on Thursday afternoon. It was joined by vehicles with plates from Tennessee, Ohio and various Indiana counties. New shops and restaurants and marketing efforts have helped draw more area residents and out-of-state visitors to Cambridge City for everything from Cincinnati Reds memorabilia to lamps, dishes, crocks and furniture. They also can find New Orleans-style food and drinks, barbecue and sweet treats. "If you drive through on a Friday or Saturday, you see a lot of license plates from Ohio, Michigan and Illinois," said Mark McCarty, who owns several downtown buildings and serves as town council president. "I've noticed that for the last year or so." Beth Leisure has owned the National Road Antique Mall at 39 W. Main St. with her husband, Rick, for 18 years. "In that time, we've seen the whole downtown blossom into a destination for antiques," she said.

That prompts the question: Why?

There are many reasons, local business owners and shoppers say.

Some are more customer-based. Visitors are finding out about Cambridge City through

billboards on Interstate 70, individual stores'

websites and referrals from the Wayne County Convention and Tourism Bureau to Antique Alley destinations.

Word of mouth and social media such as Facebook also are helping spread the word locally about new food choices.

Recent additions, including Cole's Dining and Spirits, No. 9 Grill and Main Street Sweets Cafe & Ice Cream Parlor, are attracting Wayne County residents who also browse the shops. Leisure said some of her local customers say they didn't realize the stores existed until they came to eat. And shop employees and owners are encouraging tourists to visit nearby restaurants in a community-building effort.

"I think Wayne County is blessed to have the number of wonderful small towns we do. Each town has its own identity, and Cambridge City is no exception," said Renee Doty, manager of community affairs for the Economic Development Corporation of Wayne County. "When you look at how much has happened there in the last couple of years, it's been an amazing transformation.

"New shops, new restaurants, new murals and the town has still managed to maintain its history and keep its friendly atmosphere."

## Destination location

Cambridge City draws customers from the Indianapolis and Dayton, Ohio, areas who don't mind a leisurely drive along U.S. 40, or an hour's jaunt along I-70. Jim and Karoline Blair of Greenwood like taking U.S. 40 to Cambridge City for occasional antique shopping. "It's the biggest little town on the road," Jim said. They made their

first visit to Cole's Dining and Spirits on Thursday. "It looked

like an interesting place," Karoline said about the restaurant that opened in late October.

She said the food was wonderful, and they appreciated the personal service.

The Blairs said they have friends from Illinois they plan to bring to Cambridge City on their next visit. Shoppers also praise the quality of available

**Main Street in Cambridge City draws tourists from Indiana, neighboring states and even farther**

merchandise. Cindy Weir said she and her husband usually make the trip to Cambridge City several times each year from Prairieton, south of Terre Haute. "I like the variety of things in the shops," Cindy said. "Most of it is antique instead of collectibles."

The retiree found an antique children's tea set to buy Thursday at High Hats Antique Mall. She also found two doll dresses for the dolls she collects — one at High Hats and one at National Road Antique Mall.

### Food

One of the town's new culinary highlights is Cole's Dining and Spirits at 141 W. Main St. The New Orleans-influenced Cole's is open for dinner seven nights a week and open for lunch Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. "I think everyone in town is warming up to something new and different and embracing it," said Shawn Mead of Abington, who brings about a decade of restaurant experience from New Orleans' French Quarter. He decided to head north to help Ron Cole open the business and serve as front of house and bar manager.

"His food speaks volumes," Mead said about Cole, who cooks almost all of the entrees. And Cole returns the praise for Mead. "When you're at a very high-end restaurant with hundreds of people in and out, you definitely know what you're doing," Cole said of Mead's experience. Mead said people want new adventures when it comes to food and beverages. Some popular items include Cajun Bloody Marys and Swamp Water beverages along with Zydeco snap beans. He said he has enjoyed watching people try chicken gumbo and shrimp Chippewa.

In addition to New Orleans fare, Cole's offers pork and brisket with the family's barbecue sauce called Jo Jo Martin's that originated in Tennessee. Steaks, pasta, seafood, burgers and salads are on the menu as well as weekend specials such as ribs, prime rib and trout flown in from Colorado. Popular local creations also are available. Cole has

received state recognition for his pastries, and many choices can be seen in the refrigerated case to tempt diners. Those who've tried a slice of pie or barbecue at Stone Hearth Cafe at Warm Glow Candle Outlet in Centerville already have eaten Cole's food. He owns that restaurant and once owned the Palais Royal Cafe in Centerville.

Beers from local breweries New Boswell and Noble Order are available, but Cole's also hopes to start brewing later this year.

Staff look forward to warm weather so customers can check out the new patio that offers a unique outdoor atmosphere for dining on the town. Netting, trees and lighting are to be added soon as well as live blues music.

Ron's wife, Becky, redecorated the inside and outside areas of the former Briar-Pitte to give it a more relaxed feeling, Mead said. The work received a beautification award from Cambridge City's Chamber of Commerce.

The 1890s building has been home to several bars through the years such as Worl's and Silver Dollar, as well as a pawn shop and a car dealership. Cole's kept the antique bar, hoping former customers would enjoy it. In addition to

decorating, Becky Cole also greets guests and helps in the front of house. Son Matt Cole is the general manager. Cole's has appealed to all age groups, ranging from families with children to couples on dates, Mead said. They've had corporate meetings, parties and showers. "We focus on the small little touches to make it more than coming to grab a bite to eat," Mead said.

Down the block from Cole's, a variety of sweets, beverages and sandwiches can be enjoyed.

Main Street Sweets Cafe & Ice Cream Parlor has been open since last April at 109 W. Main St. It draws tourists as well as residents from nearby towns.

Some popular items include candies such as fudge, sandwiches, coffees and ice cream in various flavors. (Frosted Sugar Cookie and Scotcheroo



Sundaes are recent additions.) Thumbprint cookies are a big seller.

The cafe is open for lunch Tuesdays through Saturdays. No lunch is served Sundays, but shoppers still can get sweet treats.

Peyton Renforth, a server, said he remembers customers from New York and England who came to Cambridge City just to go antiquing.

“There are a lot of things to do and places to eat and shop,” he said.

The store features classic hardwood floors and modern conveniences such as free Wi-Fi.

High Hats Antique Mall is celebrating its grand opening this weekend. The family-owned business recently moved from Richmond’s Historic Depot District. Before moving into the former Hole in the Wall Antique Mall at 131 W. Main St., Doug Price said they researched the market area.

“We found hands down that Cambridge City was the hot spot for the antique market right now,” Price said. He said they know some Cambridge City business owners are doing well, so they decided to take the leap of faith. The Prices planned to close the business in March for renovations and setting up merchandise, but vendors wanted to keep the shop open during the transition. Price said he’s grateful for the vendors who stepped up to staff the store while the Prices moved the merchandise.

Vendor Diana Whiteman of Glenwood said she was pleased the store was able to remain open. Her merchandise includes wood and primitive items, such as wooden bowls and hand-dipped candles. The Prices are preparing to open the second floor of High Hats within the next week or two for a glassware gallery.

### **Collaboration key**

Some of the reasons for Cambridge City’s success can be attributed to the work put in by business owners and employees.

They’ve noted increased investments and camaraderie among business owners are paying off. The shops are diverse and the passion of the shop owners helps drive the Beth Leisure

said. Ron Cole said the local business owners want each other to do well and want to work

together. He said next-door neighbor Wayne Bank was helpful in getting his new restaurant started.

And, Cole noted, diners most likely won’t eat at the same restaurant every night. “More choices bring in more people,” he said. McCarty said local organizations started working together about four years ago to partner on projects. “That’s how we’ve stepped up what we’re doing. We can’t accomplish anything if all the momentum isn’t going in the same direction,” Leisure said.

Leisure is involved with many of those efforts to build momentum. She’s president of the Cambridge City Chamber of Commerce and the county’s convention and tourism board. In addition, she is active with the Cambridge City Main Street and National Road boards.

The Canal Days festival, along with the town’s Christmas festival and growing lighting display at Creitz Park, also bring in residents from surrounding counties.

Help comes from regional sources as well.

Wayne County’s tourism bureau has had success connecting with Midwest travel writers who then have featured Antique Alley in various publications.

And some publicity efforts are aided by the state. Leisure said a new Indiana State Scenic Byways Passport Project program announced last week in conjunction with Indiana’s bicentennial could help draw tourists.

### **Future of the town**

Cambridge City business owners and government leaders are working to build on the momentum in a variety of ways. The addition of workers at Sugar

Creek Packing Co. and Dot Foods in recent years has helped the local economy. McCarty travels all over the state for his grant-writing business, Star Development, and sees the conditions of those areas. He said Cambridge City is doing well compared to surrounding communities such as Knightstown and Connersville.

“We’re realizing that creating quality of life in your town brings growth,” Leisure said. “People try to create growth, but you can’t do that. You have to create quality of life, a reason for them to move here in the future.



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