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Artist finds inspiration in town of 98 people | Local News

David Burke

10-12 minutes



Surrounded by etching from his current project, Bernard, Iowa artist Arthur Geisert patiently transfers a sketch to a copper plate in his home/studio, an old bank building on Jess Street in Bernard Friday February 12, 2010. Living an admitted life of “genteel poverty,” he scraped together \$30,000 to buy the

1930's era building on the main drag in this town northwest of Maquoketa, Iowa. "I knew nothing of Bernard," recalled Geisert, now 68. "It was a little too small for me, but it was cheap."(Kevin E. Schmidt/QUAD-CITY TIMES)

BERNARD, Iowa — This Dubuque County town of 98 is the last place Arthur Geisert ever thought he'd be.

A California native, the artist and children's book author was slammed four years ago with a perfect storm of tribulations — a divorce from his wife of

40-some years, the couple's Galena, Ill., house going without a buyer and his aging parents in need of care that required him to be close by.

But he found a home in a spot that's not even on some maps.

Living an admitted life of "genteel poverty," he scraped together \$30,000 to buy a circa-1931 bank building on Jess Street, the main drag in this town northwest of Maquoketa, Iowa, just over the Jackson County line.

"I knew nothing of Bernard," Geisert, 68, recalled. "It was a little too small for me, but it was cheap."

He uses most of the building to create his etchings, a "very easy, but very time-consuming" process involving copper plates, ink, acid baths and plenty of repetition.

"Etching's for the obsessive-compulsive," he said. "It helps."

With the exception of a vault door that leads to his bedroom,

it's impossible to tell the building used to be a bank.

When Geisert arrived, he would keep strange hours, and he kept to himself the first few months.

“I wasn't aloof; I just had other things on my mind,” he said.

As with any small town, the arrival of a new person brought with it plenty of curiosity — especially someone whose occupation needed explanation.

“I didn't mention the word 'artist' for the first three or four months,” he said. “I'd mention 'printer' because I thought they'd understand that.”

Geisert slowly became acclimated to the town, and its people to him. Among his first friends were Ron — nicknamed “Jaws” because he talked so much as a kid — and Jody Kenneally, the owners of Coe's Bar, which is 27 steps across the street from the old bank and one of three taverns in Bernard.

“I had seen him moving in, but just couldn't figure out just what he was moving in,” recalled Jaws, who helped Geisert find a contractor. “Later on, when I got to know him, I asked, ‘What was that crap you were moving in?’

“And he said, ‘I'm an artist.’ ”

Then Geisert was cornered one Sunday afternoon by Joel and Jared Meyer, who own a family horse ranch, both wanting to know about the newcomer.

“That's the guy that bought the bank. He's a print guy, he's

gonna print T-shirts,” the brothers told others, Geisert recalled.

Finally he came clean.

“Yes, it is a print shop. But, no, I’m not gonna print T-shirts,” said Geisert, who explained that he is a children’s book author and illustrator who was creating etchings inside the bank building.

“That’s why I hope you (expletive) aren’t going to be a bad influence on me,” he told them.

They laughed and replied, “Buy that (expletive) a beer.”

“I can give as good as I get,” he said with a sly grin.

In a short amount of time, the artist was taken in by the townspeople and vice versa. He became a part of the farmers’ daily coffee break at Pearl’s Place, a 20-person-capacity cafe a half-block away.

“I heard farm talk for two years. Most of it was funny. A lot of it was vulgar, but always funny,” he said. “Obscene, but wildly funny.”

Eventually, he found a way to make his work and his new home mesh.

“These people know their stuff with farming,” he said. “I’m surrounded by farmers who know their stuff, I’m surrounded by farms. They plant crops right up to their back yards, and it’s an isolated community.

“I thought, ‘how can I do a farm book and use this expertise?’ ”

The eventual answer was “Country Road ABC,” which will be published in April by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, which has published a majority of Geisert’s 30-some books.

“I’ve done picture books for 25 years, but I’ve always dealt with silliness and nonsense,” he said.

It took him six months to develop the concept. The letters, he decided, would not depict stereotypical farming scenes, but rather real-life ones. So “I” was for “inoculation,” with baby pigs getting their shots. “F” is for the Fourth of July, with Geisert using poetic license to depict Bernard’s annual tractor-trailer trip to Bluff Lake, a Maquoketa-area restaurant where the entire town convoys to celebrate on the third Saturday of each June.

And “W” was for “winter afternoon,” with farmers gathered in the warmth of a tavern that looks exactly like Coe’s Bar.

Besides the letters, a panorama of farm scenes runs along the bottom of the pages, depicting actual Bernard-area farms through the course of a year and corresponding to the lettered picture at the top.

“I wanted a picture of what farming is like in northeast Iowa right now. It’s not romanticized, no sentimentality,” Geisert said.

That meant accepting critiques from his newfound farming friends.

Geisert dubbed the corner booth of Pearl’s the “editing room,”

where he invited blatant honesty about the pictures.

“These people are thoroughly knowledgeable,” he said. “I never would have had this constant information available to me because there were so many questions on my part.”

Jaws, for instance, kept telling him the way a horse kicked was incorrect. After several tries and several rejections, Geisert walked a piece of tracing paper over to Coe’s and had the bar owner draw it himself.

Meanwhile, the Figge Art Museum in Davenport had heard that a nationally recognized etching artist and author was living only an hour away. When Figge officials approached him about an exhibit, Geisert told them what he had in the works.

An exhibit opens at the Figge later this month and continues through the end of May.

“I was hoping to continue this theme of ‘Visions of Iowa’ that we’d had with Grant Wood and John Bloom, and it offered us a new medium,” said Rima Girnius, associate curator of the Figge and curator of the Geisert exhibit. “It was a similar subject and a different way of presenting it.”

Girnius said the Figge has been seeking a children’s-themed project for a while.

“It’s a great opportunity to introduce children to the elements of etching, which is an old-fashioned technique, but do it with a subject matter that is very accessible.”

While the Dubuque Museum of Art is the official depository for

many of the 10,000 pounds of Geisert's etchings, the originals from the book will be on display at the Figge.

Geisert now calls everyone in Bernard by name, and they call him "Art" or "Arthur" in return.

The man who got quizzical stares four years ago is now a part of the village's fabric, having immortalizing the townspeople in copper plates and in print.

"You don't hear one person who talks about this guy who doesn't say what an asset he is to our town," said Carol Shanahan, who owns Pearl's after inheriting it from her parents. "I think it's very cool. Never, ever would we ever have anything like this without him."

The Figge also will be a part of the official book launch later this spring, as will the Dubuque museum — and Coe's Bar, which will host a book signing.

It took a lot of explanation to the publisher in New York City to get an OK for a children's book signing in a bar, Geisert said.

"The population's 98, and it is rough and rowdy, but it's also the center of the community," he added.