

September 19, 2008

HAVENS | FAIRHOPE, ALA.

Building on a Foundation of Utopian Principles

By CHRIS DIXON

IN 1894, a collective of 28 idealistic artisans, educators and freethinkers pulled up stakes in Des Moines and journeyed to the [Alabama](#) coast. The strangely hilly farmland and high bluffs along the breezy shores of Mobile Bay probably weren't anybody's idea of enlightenment back then. But the price was right, the oaks were mossy, the fish were jumping — and the sunsets weren't bad, either.

So the Iowans figured that 4,000 or so dirt-cheap, if occasionally storm-battered, acres might just make the perfect place to forge a utopian community.

The result was Fairhope, an oasis established under the principles of the writer and thinker Henry George, who believed that the most equitable way to run a town was to turn it into a “single tax” colony.

Its founders created a municipality that would actually own most or all of the land within city limits, and it still does today. Residents would sign a renewable 99-year lease on a parcel that allowed them to own the homes, businesses, trees, grass and everything else that rose above the sandy soil. Part of that “rent” would go to city services and state taxes and fees, but another part would go toward community projects like parks, libraries and museums.

Fairhope is now a refuge for writers, artists and iconoclasts, and for second-homers, retirees and young families. It has one foot dancing in the New Age, and one rooted in the Old South.

“I had to think long and hard as to whether I wanted to become an Alabama resident because I remembered Selma, Birmingham and all the terrible things this state put black people through during the civil rights era,” said Ken Suda, a retired automotive engineer from Detroit. “But this is a wonderful town.”

Mr. Suda moved with his wife, Diane, to the Rock Creek neighborhood of Fairhope in 2003, after splitting time between the Alaskan hamlet of Ninilchik and Navarre, Fla.

The Sudas spend fall, winter and spring in Fairhope and summers in Alaska. “Fairhope has lived up to what we hoped and more,” Ms. Suda said.

“You feel alive. There’s a Friday [Art Walk](#). There are beautiful flowers on every street corner. A lot of authors live here. The library is five times bigger than the one in Navarre and has book reviews and signings monthly. We can go to concerts on the bluff, watch the sunset and listen to a great orchestra.”

The Scene

Fairhope, given its visionary history, has never fit into the traditional Alabama mold. A small example: The first male president and member of the town’s 100-year-old [garden club](#) is a retired associate superintendent of schools who arrived from outside Chicago in 2004. And the man, John Meyer, still marvels at the fact that he can grow a banana tree in his backyard. “When I went to my first meeting, a lady named Agnes stood up and said, ‘If he can’t be part of the garden club, then I don’t know if I want to be in it,’ ” he said. “Now there are eight men in the club.”

Mr. Meyer and his wife, Valerie, say they are often drawn to Fairhope’s very walkable downtown. Many of its early-20th-century buildings are framed by wrought-iron railings and narrow porches straight out of New Orleans.

And there are shops ripe with funk and quirk, like the mazelike Page and Palette — a [coffee shop](#), bookstore, stationer and art supply depot. Inside, you might find the town curmudgeons wrestling over politics, complemented by local writers like Fannie Flagg (“Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe”) or Winston Groom (“Forrest Gump”) stopping by for a pastry.

For post-stroll repasts, there are grouper po’ boys (blackened or fried, \$8) and sunsets over Mobile Bay at the Fly Creek Cafe, or the chicken salad and tropical fruit lunch plate at Sandra’s Place (\$8.25).

The Sudas and the Meyers say they also relish the town’s range of social gatherings — from poker circles to dancing to the farmers’ market.

“We also just love the fact that there’s a local hardware store,” Mr. Meyer said. “It doesn’t look like they’ve taken anything out of there since the 1950s. I took in a lamp and told them, ‘I’m not sure what’s wrong with it.’ In Chicago, they would have charged you \$20 an hour for labor on it. Here, they fixed a wire and said, ‘Don’t worry about it.’ I went to have a flat tire fixed at the

local garage. They said, 'It's \$5.' I gave him a 20, but he didn't have change. So he said, 'Just pay me next time you're here.' That's Fairhope in a nutshell."

Pros

Fairhope has excellent [fishing](#) (flounder and redfish), sailing and light traffic. When the urge to go to a big town hits, it's not so far from Pensacola, Fla.; Biloxi, Miss.; or even New Orleans.

Cons

Many Fairhope residents worry about overdevelopment, rising property taxes and insurance costs and [hurricanes](#).

The Real Estate Market

Fairhope, unsurprisingly, has been affected by the national slump in the real estate market. Rance Reehl, director of the Baldwin County Association of Realtors, said inventories are at a high.

The median home price in 2006 was \$230,000, and today, it's \$250,000. Mr. Reehl said that figure is deceptive because it doesn't take into account the big concessions sellers are making. "People are paying for closing costs and offering six months of principal and interest," he said. "There are a lot of incentives."

Most of the oldest homes in town, known as bay houses, were simple getaways built in the first third of the 20th century. In 1977, Judy Niemeyer, a local real estate agent, bought a two-bedroom bay house on a waterfront lot for \$55,000. The cottage eventually became a guesthouse for a larger home, and last year the entire package was sold for \$1.65 million.

But you don't have to spend that kind of money to land a bay house or an old Craftsman-style cottage — provided it's a few blocks inland or closer to downtown in the Fruit and Nut District. A small, unrestored house with eight-foot ceilings and hardwood floors that had gone for the low \$300's in mid-2006 might now sell in the mid-\$200's, local agents say. A restored, or new, house downtown can still go for \$2 million.

There are also subdivisions on the edge of town. Joe Mikulka, a retired aerospace engineer, and his wife, Rebecca, paid \$475,000 for a 2,900-square-foot house on the fairway in the Quail Creek Estates neighborhood. The couple had lived in Sun City Summerlin, outside Las Vegas, but wanted a change. "We looked at so many other places," Mr. Mikulka said. "Jacksonville, St. Joe, even Seaside, the place in 'The Truman Show.' We always came back to Fairhope. The

home we bought had been on the market for over a year. We got it for a little less than the seller was asking.”

Outside Fairhope, off Highway 32, sits the Polo Grounds, where \$800,000 will get you five acres that cannot legally be subdivided, a house and a barn. Within 15 minutes of Fairhope, other rural houses with acreage can be found, starting at about \$400,000.

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION 16,164, according to a 2006 [Census Bureau](#) estimate.

SIZE 11 square miles.

WHERE Fairhope is on Mobile Bay, about a 25-minute drive southeast of Mobile itself.

WHO'S BUYING Families and retirees from the Midwest.

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING The Bay Breeze Guest House (742 South Mobile Street; 251-928-8976; www.baybreeze.us) is a popular bed-and-breakfast, and its owners, Becky and Bill Jones, pride themselves on knowing Fairhope's history, past and present. Rates are \$155 to \$185.

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