

Wabash is drawing on its past to build its future.

The town's history "plays a really key role in our redevelopment strategy," said Bill Konyha, president and chief executive officer of the Economic Development Group of Wabash County.

"We do have a sense of history and we choose to recognize it and embrace it because of who we are," said Angie Beauchamp, whose family is involved in several historic projects and programs. Wabash County has three historic districts, including one downtown, where buildings date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It boasts a county museum that rivals much larger museums in the quality and design of its displays, a Carnegie Library and stalwart businesses like Schlemmer Brothers Metalworks, which has been owned and operated by the same family for more than a century.

The city of Wabash, incorporated in 1866, has been blessed by philanthropic families and individuals such as Mark Honeywell, who started a heating and plumbing business at the beginning of the 20th century and later used his considerable financial resources to establish the Honeywell Community Center and its supporting Honeywell Foundation.

The Honeywell Center, which brings in 200,000 to 250,000 visitors a year,

is an asset "that most other communities just don't have," Konyha said.

Far more recently, Richard Ford, whose family built another successful business, Ford Meter Box, created the Charley Creek Foundation to support arts, culture and historic preservation. Its projects include: the Dr. James Ford Historic Home, a museum created in the Civil War surgeon's Hill Street house; the Charley Creek Gardens; and the Charley Creek Arts Fest.

Ford's current effort is the \$15-million restoration of the former Hotel Indiana, which has been renamed the Charley Creek Inn. Built in 1920 and located a block from the Honeywell Center, the hotel at 111 W. Market St. was once considered the city's most endangered historic building.



Richard Ford started the Charley Creek Foundation, which is nearing the end of a \$15-million renovation project to turn the former Hotel Indiana into the Charley Creek Inn..

Purchased by Ford in 2008, the painstakingly restored hotel is expected to open around Valentine's Day. Just across Market Street from

the hotel is the Eagle's Theatre, which inherited the "most endangered" designation after the old hotel was saved. In mid-January, the Honeywell Foundation revealed that it has purchased the theater from owner Troy Jarvis and had plans to continue to operate it and establish a fund to pay for improvements. Helping it along will be a



The Honeywell Foundation recently acquired the Eagles Theater in downtown Wabash.

grant of matching funds for facade improvements from Wabash Marketplace, the city's Main Street organization.

Built in 1906 to host Vaudeville performances, the theater named after the Eagle's Lodge began showing films in its three-story auditorium shortly thereafter. It has continued to do so, without a break, to this day. If not the longest run in movie theater history, it is, at the very least, very close.

“We’re researching that,” said Honeywell Foundation Executive Director Tod Minnich.

The theater’s eight part-time employees became foundation employees with the purchase. On a recent Friday night, Minnich got into the spirit of things by pitching in to take tickets when the theater premiered “Avatar.”

“We like to understand the business,” he said.

Diagonally opposite the theater is Modoc’s Market, which sits in the red-brick Bradley Building, constructed in 1873. The combination coffee shop/gift shop at the corner of Market and Miami streets takes its name from one of the area’s more colorful bits of history, the November 1942 rampage of an escaped circus elephant.



Modoc’s Market is named after an elephant that escaped from a circus visiting Wabash in 1942.

Angie and Michael Beauchamp became sole owners of the building, which has historic apartments on its

upper floors, about five years ago. Naming the shop after Modoc “made sense to us because of the history,” Angie Beauchamp said.

The story of Modoc has been told with variations and embellishments over the years, but the gist of it is this: Modoc and two other elephants with the Great American Circus, which was performing at Wabash High School, were spooked by barking dogs and ran off. The other two pachyderms wandered just a short way and were quickly recaptured, but Modoc remained at large for at least five days.

At one point, apparently attracted by the smell of roasting peanuts at the Bradley Brothers drugstore, located where the market now resides, the hungry elephant charged into the building for a snack and crashed out through the other side.

Legend says she then poked her head into a bar across the street, which was enough to make some of those present to swear off drinking, Angie Beauchamp said.

A posse was formed, and then-Gov. Henry Schricker even joined the chase. The story made national news, even reaching U.S. sailors aboard ships at sea. It took a Carolina animal trainer, Corona Ezra Smith, to coax Modoc back to her trailer with his elephant whispers and loaves of bread dropped like a trail of bread crumbs.

As an additional tribute to Modoc, the Beauchamp’s have decorated the side-

walks outside the store with a parade of pachyderms. And Michael Beauchamp does historic programs on another circus figure with ties to Wabash — and Modoc — famed lion tamer Terrel Jacobs, who is buried in Falls Cemetery.

Their son, Parker Beauchamp, is the fourth generation of the family involved with Beauchamp McSpadden Insurance. He’s also the current president of Wabash Marketplace, and shares his family’s respect for local history.

“People, at least of my generation, you want to be part of something. You want a sense of place,” Parker Beauchamp said.

Local history is also a very personal thing for Tracy Stewart, the executive director of the county’s historical museum. Her family figures in some of the museum’s displays.

“It’s all about me,” she joked as she gave an impromptu tour.

The museum was established in the 1920s, and occupied space in Memorial Hall, which was built for Civil War veterans and dedicated in 1899, for many decades. Stewart had fond memories of visits there as a child, and when she moved back to town a few years ago with her family, she couldn’t wait to show it to her young son.

To her surprise, she said, “when we came back it was closed.”



The Wabash County Historical Museum is located in the former Big Four department store.

The museum, in fact, was in the process of moving to a new home, the former Big Four department store built in 1894 and named after the city's rail shops. Stewart began volunteering at the museum, which opened its doors in 2006, and then became its director.

The new museum's exhibits, which start chronologically with the glacial period that left behind the Wabash River, are light years away from a typical small county museum's shelves of dark, dusty artifacts.

"Museums have changed. People expect different things," Stewart said.

Designed by a prominent firm from Seattle, the displays are colorful, interactive and represent the best of the museum's vast collection.

"We chose the pieces that best told the story," Stewart said.

The 20,000-square-foot exhibit area includes pieces on the area's American Indian cultures, early settlers, the role of the railroads, the involvement of local residents in various wars and,

of course, a display that commemorates the city being the first in the United States to be electrically lighted.

A small theater shows a short film on local history. A gallery for revolving exhibits just closed a display of Abraham Lincoln portraits and will reopen in February with a collection devoted to Stephen Douglas, the political rival whose debates with him made Lincoln famous.



Tracy Stewart, executive director of the Wabash County Historical Museum, said the museum took care to select exhibits that best tell the county's story. (Photos by Linda Lipp)

Except for a small contribution from the county, the new museum was funded entirely by donations from businesses and individuals.

That's typical of Wabash, Angie Beauchamp said. "The community has a real sense of giving, and just when you think we can't have another campaign, we do."