

communityprofile



PHOTO / JOHN BERGE

The Fargo clock and the old Northern Pacific Railroad depot. The depot, built from 1898 to 1900 is now home to the Fargo Park District and a Senior Center.

A Little Help from Your Friends Despite occasional high water and deep snow, Fargo, North Dakota residents' persistent good will gets them through tough times. Plus, the city's regional dominance in health care makes it a great landing place for physicians.

By Pamela M. Prescott

Before he made the move from south Massachusetts to Fargo, North Dakota, cardiologist Andrew Merliss, MD, was receiving letters and phone calls from Fargo folks, welcoming him to North Dakota's largest city.

One person in particular, a sociology professor at one of the three universities in the area, "took us under his wing," says Merliss.

They had instant common ground

in their mutual faith of Judaism, Merliss says. "The Jewish community is a small community here, and he wanted us to feel welcome."

The early communication also helped in quickly establishing relationships with people who could help care for Merliss's then-5-year-old son, who has special needs. "Through my friend, we were able to make contact with a ready supply of baby-sitters and therapists to work with my son. Where we lived in south Massachusetts, if it were the reverse and

we were moving there, it would have been a very difficult thing to bring people down from Boston to work with him, but here we have easy access to university staff and gifted students who are very willing to help."

Professionally, Merliss has everything he could ask for in Fargo as one of 10 cardiologists on staff with MeritCare Health System, the largest physician group/hospital in the region. With board certification in cardiac electro-

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physiology, Merliss says MeritCare’s willingness to build a new C.E.P. laboratory to his specifications was “the carrot” that lured him to Fargo. Once he arrived, he says, “the greatest surprise of Fargo for us is the friendships we have made.”

Movin’ on

But Fargo is really just half of the story. The city usually comes hyphenated as part of a metropolitan area with Moorhead, Minnesota in its name. Fargo-Moorhead is bisected by the Red River, one of the few north-flowing rivers in the hemisphere. When rapidly growing West Fargo is included, the greater Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area, with a combined population close to 170,000, is the largest urban center between Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Spokane, Washington.

Fargo was named for William G. Fargo, a director of the Northern Pacific Railway and founder of the Wells-Fargo Express Company. The town site was platted in early 1872 amid speculation about where the Northern Pacific Railway would cross the Red River. The Northern Pacific, built to connect Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean, entered Fargo on June 8, 1872. Fargo grew steadily through the 1870s and 1880s, and became a principal distribution and transportation center for North Dakota and western Minnesota, as well as a regional



PHOTO / LOWELL WOLFF



PHOTO / FARGO-MOORHEAD C&VB

ABOVE, Snowmobilers chase away the winter blues on groomed trails around Fargo.

LEFT, The Fargo-Moorhead Red Hawks, a semi-professional baseball team, entertain families on a summer evening.

BELOW, Harvesting wheat near Fargo. The Red River Valley is known as the “Bread Basket of the World.”



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POPULATION:

Fargo: 83,778

MSA (Cass County, ND,
and Clay County, MN):
166,396

CLIMATE:

Annual rainfall: 20"

Annual snowfall: 35"

Average High/Low
Temperatures:

January - 15°/-4°, July -
83°/59°

Days of sunshine: 199

TRANSPORTATION:

AIRPORTS - Hector

International Airport is
served by Northwest
and United Express.

RAIL - Amtrak

BUS - Greyhound,
Metropolitan Area Transit

INTERSTATES - Interstate
94 to Minneapolis, MN
(240 miles) and
Bismarck, ND (190
miles); Interstate 29 to
Winnipeg, Canada (240
miles) and Sioux Falls,
SD (240 miles).

COST OF LIVING:

97.8 (100 is average)

Median home price:
\$118,000

Median Household
Income: \$36,133

*The Red River winds among
sunflower, wheat, sugar beet,
and soybean fields just a few
miles north of Fargo.*

center of commerce.

Fargo was once an agricultural center in the fertile Red River Valley, known as the "Bread Basket of the World," but the lagging farm economy has forced the community to nurture economic diversity. Employers are attracted by the Midwest work ethic and the high skill level of the work force here. Dubbed the "Silicon Prairie" by *Fortune* magazine, Fargo is

home to several software companies, including its own Great Plains Software, a leading provider of financial accounting software for midsize companies, and Navigation Technologies, which opened a Fargo facility in 1996 to build data bases for vehicle navigation systems. Even agriculture is diversifying: The American Sugar Company, a cooperative, has 2,800 sugar beet grower-members

who produce about 10 million tons of beets annually.

The community's major economic sectors today are higher education, health care, and retail, all taking advantage of Fargo-Moorhead's centrality to the eastern portions of both North and South Dakota and western Minnesota. With four major medical providers—MeritCare, Dakota Clinic

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Ltd., Dakota Heartland Health System, and U.S. Veterans Affairs—health care is by far the community's largest employment sector. MeritCare, the VA, and Dakota Heartland all run hospitals, and Dakota Clinic Ltd. a multi-specialty group, has partnered with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota to build its own facility. In addition, Lutheran Health Systems, with 28 hospitals and 30 nursing homes in primarily rural communities in 14 western and midwestern states, has headquarters in Fargo and will continue to operate those offices in the wake of its September 1, 1999 merger with Samaritan Health System of Phoenix.

MeritCare's Roger Maris Cancer Center, an outpatient facility for adults and children, is named after Fargo's hometown celebrity who died of lymphoma. Playing for the New York Yankees, Maris hit 61 home runs in 1961, breaking Babe Ruth's single season home-run record. The center's cancer treatment was ranked 44th in the nation in a study published July 19, 1999, by *U.S. News World Report*, that looked at 6,299 U.S. hospitals.

The presence of North Dakota State University, Moorhead State University, and Concordia College in Moorhead, plus the Fargo campus of the University of North Dakota School of Medicine, based in Grand Forks, mean that higher education is a major employment sector as well as a major cultural and entertainment asset for the community. More than 20,000 students attend the four institutions.

With more than 100 of them situated here, trucking companies appreciate Fargo-Moorhead's place in North America. Increased commerce among Canada, the U.S., and Mexico thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has benefited

the cities, which are directly on the route between Winnipeg, Canada, and Monterrey, Mexico. Scott Hutchins, Moorhead's director of community and economic development, points out, "We're on a major transportation corridor."

A cup of civilization

Fargo residents are not always at work, though. Internist Michael Sheldon, MD, who grew up in Minot, North Dakota, 264 miles northwest of Fargo, and graduated from UND School of Medicine, enjoys events at the FargoDome, which opened in 1992 on the NDSU campus as home to the university's football team, the Bisons.

The arena is also popular for music concerts by the likes of Elton John, Neil Diamond, Garth Brooks, and the Eagles. When Sheldon and his wife saw the Rolling Stones there last winter, they sat in the 18th row. "What's interesting here is you can get good seats to shows like that and know the people sitting around you," he says.

Sheldon and his wife, a Fargo native, have two children ages three and four, so they appreciate the Red River Zoo in Fargo and the more than 100 public parks covering 2,500 acres in the metropolitan area. They also enjoy the new Newman Outdoor Field, with seating for 4,700 and home field to the Fargo-Moorhead Red Hawks. The team is a member of the Northern League, a semiprofessional league that's independent of the majors. Not only is the baseball good, Sheldon says, there's a great playground for the kids and fun, family-oriented entertainment between innings.

Local music and theater thrive because of the university talent, says Medical Oncologist John Leitch, MD. Whether they perform in the local symphony, in community theater or help

out at the outdoor theater program for high school students offered each summer at Trollwood Park, the expertise of college faculty and students is appreciated. "We just saw 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' at Trollwood, and you'd never know it was high school students. It was so good," says Leitch, who is an executive partner for the oncology aggregate at the MeritCare Roger Maris Cancer Center.

Merliss credits the large student population for the success of so many independent coffee houses in Fargo-Moorhead. He and his wife, Lori, found one soon after arriving from Boston that is still their favorite because of its bookstore and poetry readings, in addition to java. "When we found it," Merliss says, "my wife and I said to each other, 'This is our link to civilization.'"

High water marks

Of course, one of the key elements of Fargo's culture is its weather. "We describe this as a four-season area," says Moorhead's development director Hutchins, noting that climate-savvy people know that really means long, cold winters.

Plastic Surgeon Kenneth Hunter, MD, who joined Dakota Clinic in July after years of practicing in southern California and one year in Washington state, is unfazed by the prospect of his first North Dakota winter. "A Fargo winter is a treat in store," says Hunter. "I figure, if the Indians got through it and they didn't have Gore-Tex and SUVs, it's just a question of adaptation."

Hunter has already adapted several times to the changing medical climate. After leaving California because of a "down-sizing," he says, he didn't stay in Washington because of too few patients for his specialty in reconstructive hand surgery. "Dakota Clinic seems ideal to

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me, with a critical mass of physicians, administration, and plenty of patients needing care,” Hunter says.

Red River Valley residents won't soon forget what the weather did in 1997, when heavy snow and rain caused torrential flooding. People also remember the way the people of the region dealt with the disaster.

“We moved here in 1996, so we were here when the tremendous floods came in '97,” Cardiologist Merliss says. “Fargo didn't get it nearly as bad as Grand Forks, but the community was amazing in the way they dealt with it. There were busloads of people who showed up to sandbag complete strangers' houses,” Merliss says. “I just couldn't help but be impressed by the type of people who came together in the face of a crisis.” He's named the generous spirit he witnessed ‘Fargo nice.’

Internist Sheldon says he met his neighbors real fast in the spring of '97 with water waist-deep in the street and his newly built home accessible only by boat. Sandbags kept his basement dry, so instead of enduring hardship, his family actually reaped long-term benefits from the high waters. “We became really good friends with our neighbors,” he says.

The high water in Fargo was the result of overland flooding, which occurred when the Red River and its tributaries had already crested. Water from snowmelt and heavy rains that fateful spring had no place to go but over the flat Red River Valley. “There was 40 to 50 square miles of water trying to make its way into the river,” Sheldon says.

Grand Forks, 80 miles north of Fargo, was the worst hit community on the river, with 90 percent of the city of 52,500 evacuated and reconstruction still under way.

The potential for a repeat of the flood barely affects the way people live,

Sheldon says. “That was a 500-year-flood. We had 120 inches of snow that winter, when normally we get 30 to 40 inches.” Precautions can be seen in new construction, however, with homes being built on higher foundations and with berms to fend off high water.

Day-to-day, the 34-year-old physician says it's easy to focus on the positive aspects of the region. “The quality of life is really good in Fargo. It's a good place to raise a family,” says Sheldon, who works at one of Dakota Clinic's community-based facilities. “And, it's a good place to practice medicine. There's a large population base, and it's growing,” he says. “In Fargo, we see referrals from eastern North and South Dakota and western Minnesota.”

The lighter side

While winter and high water test North Dakotans' survival skills, summer evokes a kind of euphoria. Within an hour's drive from some of Minnesota's most beautiful lake country, many Fargo-Moorhead residents enjoy family lake cottages and fishing trips.

Internist Bruce G. Pitts, MD, an executive partner at MeritCare, says that after a long winter of going to work and coming home in the dark, summertime pleasures are extra special. “You just say the word ‘lake’ and people get this funny look. Their eyes glaze over, and they start thinking cottage, walleye, boating, cookouts,” says Pitts, the owner of a Minnesota cabin.

Summer also means long days, with the sun coming up at 4:30 a.m. and twilight skies until 11 p.m. “People can golf until 10 o'clock,” Pitts says. The 20 courses within 30 miles of Fargo-Moorhead make tee times accessible, even at those late hours.

Pitts, a Rhode Island native, said he never thought of Fargo as a place to

work 20 years ago when he was beginning his career. But because he received a full scholarship from the U.S. Public Health Service for his medical school training at the University of Pennsylvania, he was obliged to start his practice in an “area of need.”

Barnesville, Minnesota, about 20 miles southeast of Fargo on Interstate 94, qualified, so that's where Pitts began. He became familiar with the nearby Fargo medical community as he often referred patients here. When his obligation was completed in Barnesville, there was no going back East for Pitts, even though he says the chief residency was waiting for him at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia. Instead, he went to Fargo, where he has experienced what he describes as “a very diverse career that has been professionally gratifying.”

“I never would have thought of [Fargo] unless I was basically forced to like I was,” Pitts says. In addition to practicing medicine, Pitts has taught at UND School of Medicine, where he is now the associate dean in charge of the five residencies offered on the Fargo campus. He also enjoys his current administrative role at MeritCare. He chuckles that his brother, an attorney in Manhattan, “still thinks I'm doing missionary work. He just can't imagine not living in New York.”

Nevertheless, Pitts believes in the community and that opportunities still await physicians just starting out in Fargo. “I think the same types of opportunities that I had are still available here,” he says, “and that's because this is not a densely populated area with lots of competition. You'll find that a lot of people wear more than one hat. This is just a great medical community.” ■

Pam Prescott regularly writes UO's Community Profile. She lives in Roscoe, Illinois.