

## More Than Bridges: Madison County, Iowa

by *Thomas Cackler, PassPorter Guest Contributor*

Nestled in the quiet farm country of central Iowa lies a quiet rural area known best for its covered bridges and the romance that captivated a nation. While *The Bridges of Madison County* no longer tops the bestseller lists, the quiet landscape of Madison County, Iowa, remains one of the best-kept tourist secrets in the country. With its lush landscape, small town charm, and memorable tourist destinations, this area has a little something for everyone.

Madison County is located in central Iowa, just southwest of the state capital, Des Moines. With Interstate 35 bordering the county on the east and Interstate 80 bordering the county on the north, Madison is easy to get to and offers a wide selection of recreation and tourist activities. Settled in the mid-1800s, the county saw the construction of the now-famous covered bridges later that century. Six bridges exist today, by either preservation or re-creation.

Perhaps the most famous of these bridges, the Roseman Covered, still stands in its original location after an extensive renovation in 1992. Featured in the motion picture and novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, the bridge stands as the second longest in the county and is home to the Roseman Bridge Store. Additionally, the Holliswell Bridge and the Stone Foot Bridge feature prominently in the movie.

Unfortunately, arson severely damaged Francesca's House from the film and it no longer offers tours, although you can still visit the grounds for photos. However, many other buildings and landscapes from the film still exist today. From the Texaco station that now houses an Internet cafe to M. Young and Co. feed store that served as the General Store in the movie, fans of the movie and novel will find many familiar places and buildings as they visit.

But the movie and the novel are not the only draws in the area. Every fall since 1970, the entire county descends on the town square in Winterset for the annual Covered Bridge Festival. Like many small town fall festivals, this one features booths full of local produce, handcrafted items, and other fun events. Held the first full weekend in October, this annual festival highlights the area's past, present, and future, surrounded by the majestic fall colors of the Middle River Valley. Music, presentations, and a parade all highlight this quintessential small town celebration.

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Winterset also features a city park that rivals larger cities for attractions and amenities. In addition to the relocated Cutler-Donahue Covered Bridge, the city park features a hedge maze, camping facilities, and two other historical attractions. Besides the previously mentioned Stone Bridge, the Clark Tower stands as a monument to some of the area's first settlers. Built in 1929 and at over 25 feet tall, the limestone structure offers an impressive view of the surrounding area.

Winterset is also home to a vibrant town square of specialty shops featuring collectibles, gourmet food, and other merchandise. If you are a quilting fan, the home of Fons and Porter's Love of Quilting television program and magazine are also located here on the town square. If you have a desire to sit in the same seat Clint Eastwood did during the filming of *The Bridges of Madison County*, you can stop into the Northside Cafe and grab the fourth stool from the front of the restaurant.

However, the most famous person to ride off from Winterset is still one of the town's favorite sons. Marion Morrison, better known to most as John Wayne, spent his early childhood in Winterset after his birth on May 26, 1907. While his family moved when he was four, the house where he was born still stands and offers tours daily from 10:00 am to 4:30 pm except for New Year's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For a cost of \$4/adult, \$3/senior, and \$1/child, you can visit the birthplace and see memorabilia from classic John Wayne films such as *Rio Lobo*, *True Grit*, and *Stagecoach*. An adjacent store sells John Wayne merchandise and proceeds go to help fund the non-profit John Wayne Birthplace Society.

Madison County shows that while Iowa isn't atop many people's top places to visit, the charm of a tourism destination isn't in bright lights or theme parks. Instead, these tourism destinations are memorable for the experiences they offer their guests. Whether it's the romantic story of Francesca and Robert, or the rugged individualism as showcased by Winterset's favorite son draws you in, Madison is a destination that is highly recommended.

*About The Author: Thomas Cackler is the PassPorter's Club "on call" editor and consultant. A veteran of five trips to Walt Disney World and one Disney Cruise since 2002, Thomas is a member of several online Disney communities including the PassPorter forums where he shares his knowledge and love of the Disney Parks with anyone who will listen. He lives in Iowa with his wife Julie and nephew Joey.*

Article last updated: 5/17/2007

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