

Pipe Organs from Iowa

LAKE CITY, Iowa (AP) – You might think of coming to this town of 1,800 people in the rolling hills of west-central Iowa to buy fertilizer or seed corn.

It's not a place that immediately comes to mind when looking for a concert quality pipe organ.

"There are other builders in small towns, but it's unusual to be in such a tiny town," said Howard Maple, executive secretary of the American Institute of Organ Builders.

Lynn Dobson, who grew up in nearby Lanesboro, built his first organ in his father's barn, following a manual written by a 19th century organ architect.

Thirty years later, organs from Dobson Pipe Organ Builders are played in churches and concert halls from New York to California.

The \$163 million Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels being built in downtown Los Angeles is getting a Dobson organ. So is the concert hall at the \$265 million Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia.

"These are arguably two of the most important organs in the country being built today," Dobson said.

Dobson's 18 employees work in an ordinary brick building overlooking the square in Lake City. About half are musicians.

Attracting them to Lake City – and then keeping them – is a challenge, Dobson said. It's a two-hour drive to catch a plane and almost an hour to the bank.

"We've built a reputation for building good organs and we're quite well known across the country and even the world," Dobson said. "Other builders I know that don't have nearly the reputation can get people to work for them right away, but it's been hard for us.

"Generally for the wives and family, if they're not from a small town, it's like moving to the end of the earth."

Maple said he once thought about working for Dobson.

"Then I got out a map and when I saw where it was, I decided to go someplace else," he said.

Because some of the work is so technical, Dobson must look outside the area to fill those

jobs. He found several people who stayed for a few years, then got antsy to be in a bigger place and left.

For other jobs, Dobson hires locally and trains those workers. They tend to stay.

To travel, which Dobson does frequently, he and his staff first must drive two hours to Des Moines or Omaha, Neb., to catch a plane. For an 8 a.m. flight, that means leaving at 5, making for a long day of travel.

There are other concerns.

"We have suppliers from Germany, England, Austria, so we're dealing with foreign currencies, shipping and customs and imports," Dobson said. "We're really in a lot of things that people typically in a community like this know nothing about."

Because of that, the company does its banking in Fort Dodge, 40 miles away.

Some workers take to the small-town lifestyle. Design engineer Jon Thieszen has been with Dobson since the shop opened in 1975. John Ourensma moved to Lake City from Battle Creek, Mich., where he had been a church organist for 13 years.

"I grew up in a small town in Vermont, in a town smaller than this actually," Ourensma said. "So I did not have a real fear of living in a small town."

Dobson copes by trying to capitalize on the uniqueness of his locale. When a customer or supplier visits, Dobson entertains them at his home, a historic house that he renovated. Visitors usually are struck with the serenity of the area, he said, and leave with a favorable impression.

"I had a consulting person tell me about 20 years ago that we had to get to the point that we could use this remote location to our advantage," Dobson said.

"We could either look at it that we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere and there's all these problems for us, or we could use it as a way of building a mystique, sort of a cachet, exotic. I think we're actually to that point maybe."

Dobson's success is an example of what can happen in a small town when a local businessman finds the right resources, said Stu Huntington, who teaches in Iowa State's department of community and regional planning.

"If towns can see their way clear to encourage young entrepreneurs and not let them go down the road, that actually is a pretty good way to go," Huntington said.

Mayor Merle Cunningham certainly is happy to have Dobson's company in town.

"When you have master craftsmen and trained musicians in your community, they bring a cultural aspect you wouldn't generally associate with a small town," Cunningham said.

"You look at what they're doing and in this small town, out in the middle of the cornfields, is this great monument rising up."